

THE ROMANCE GROUP

5 COMPLETE  
ROMANCES!

~~\$2.00~~

SPECIAL  
\$1.75

MAR  
APR  
1987

# 5 Great Romances

My Wild  
Irish  
Rogue

Bringing  
Up Baby

Kid at  
Heart

Tailor-  
Made

Dillon's  
Promise

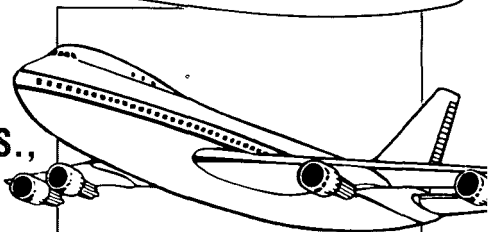


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# FLIGHT TO ROMANCE SWEEPSTAKES!

## GRAND PRIZE

**A Free Trip For Two  
Anywhere In The U.S.,  
Plus One Week At  
A First Class Hotel**



- 100 PIECES CARRY ON LUGGAGE!
- IT'S EASY TO ENTER AND WIN!
- NO PURCHASE NECESSARY!

Yes, you can win this delightful trip for two anywhere in the United States. Imagine the romance of Hawaii, the excitement of Hollywood, the fantasy of New York... or simply use this trip to visit relatives or old friends. We'll jet you to the destination of your choice, put you up in first-class hotels. Plus 100 winners receive a designer piece of carry-on luggage.



## IT'S EASY TO ENTER AND WIN!

You are automatically entered into the sweepstakes when you take advantage of our subscription offer. Just check the appropriate box on the attached Charter Subscription and Renewal Application, and fill in your name and address. No need to send money now. We'll start your subscription and bill you. No purchase necessary, see official rules.



### OFFICIAL RULES

1. No Purchase Necessary to enter or win... check the appropriate "Yes" or "No" box on the Charter Subscription and Renewal Application, either way you are eligible for the prizes offered.  
2. One entry per contestant. All entries must be received by April 1, 1987. Winners selected in random drawings from all entries received under the supervision of Marden-Kane, an independent judging organization whose decisions are final. Winners will be notified by mail. Versions of this sweepstakes with different prizes may appear in other Digest Publishing Magazines. Winners will receive the prize offered in their respective magazine. Grand Prize valued at \$5,000. Runner-up prizes valued at \$60. each. Winner acknowledged and agrees to have name and likeness used for publicity purposes.  
3. Sweepstakes open to residents of the United States, except employees and their families of Digest Publishing Inc., Marden-Kane and their respective affiliated companies. All Federal, State and local regulations apply. Odds of winning determined by number of entries received. Trip subject to availability. Taxes are the responsibility of the prize winners. For the name of the Grand Prize Winner send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Marden-Kane, 410 Lakeville Road, Lake Success, NY 11042.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

# 5 Great Romances

MARCH/APRIL 1987 • VOLUME 5 NO. 2

## CONTENTS

<b>BRINGING UP BABY</b> .....	by Diana Morgan .....	2
<b>TAILOR-MADE</b> .....	by Elizabeth Barrett .....	35
<b>MY WILD IRISH ROGUE</b> .....	by Helen Carter .....	65
<b>KID AT HEART</b> .....	by Aimee Duvall .....	93
<b>DILLON'S PROMISE</b> .....	by Cinda Richards .....	121

A bi-monthly digest publication featuring five great romances in every issue... each a complete story.

All of the stories that appear in 5 Great Romances have been specially selected for inclusion, and all have been carefully edited so that they retain all of the flavor and meaning of the originals.

In each issue, 5 Great Romances brings to love and romance readers skillfully condensed stories packed with all the emotions, thrills, and excitement that have made them so popular.

5 Great Romances (ISSN 0738-0941) is published bi-monthly by Digest Publishing, Inc., J. Shapiro, President. Executive and editorial offices at 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Second Class postage paid at Fort Lee, N.J. and additional mailing offices. Subscription rates U.S. and possessions: 6 issues—\$10.50. Outside the U.S. \$10.00 additional per year. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07632. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscriptions, write 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription. Printed in U.S.A. ©Digest Publishing, Inc., 1986. All rights reserved.



**LYNN LAUBER**  
MANAGING EDITOR

**JOHN MCCUEN**  
ART DIRECTOR

**RICHARD Z. GONZALEZ**  
PRODUCTION MANAGER

**MARTA MACIEL**  
COMPOSITOR

**SUSAN MANSFIELD**  
SUBSCRIPTION  
MANAGER

**PEGGY POWERS**  
ADVERTISING  
DIRECTOR



# *Bringing Up Baby*

---

*Can handsome but harried efficiency expert George Demarest survive the antics of a scruffy toddler called Speedy? Not without the help of good-natured neighbor Andie Maguire—who innocently agrees to baby-sit the “monster” and finds her life becoming a three-ring circus!*

---

—DIANA MORGAN—

---

“O kay, lady, that’ll be twenty bucks a floor extra to move ya in—that’s per man.”

Andie looked flabbergasted at the burly mover. His three helpers all managed to look away, as if they had played this scene before. Here she was only an hour in New York City, and already she had a problem.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “When you left my home in Winston-Salem yesterday, you gave me a flat rate.”

“Yeah, but that was before I knew you had rented a fourth-floor walkup,” the man explained.

“Oh, all right,” she said crossly. “Now, let’s see. That’s three flights times four men—”

“Four flights, lady.” He pointed to the steps leading up to the front stoop of the brownstone.

“This is highway robbery,” she protested. Feeling cornered, she looked

From BRINGING UP BABY by Diana Morgan, Copyright © 1986 by Irene Goodman and Alex Kamaroff. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.



# 1-800-345-3541

IN IOWA (712) 323-0639

## EXPLODE WITH ENERGY

### ENERGY TABS & CAPSULES

### CAFFEINE

2. Blue 30/30	325 mg.
3. White 20/20	300 mg.
4. 357 Magnum	325 mg.
6. Block Buster	325 mg.
7. Red/Black Cap	200 mg.
8. Black/Clear Cap	200 mg.
9. Yellow/Black Cap	200 mg.
11. Oblong Blue Spec	200 mg.
12. Small Blue Cap	175 mg.
14. Large Pink Heart	200 mg.
15. Black Mole	325 mg.
16. Orange Cap	200 mg.
17. White Mole	325 mg.

100 Lot	500 Lot	1000 Lot
\$7.00	\$25.00	\$35.00

### DECONGESTANTS

### EPHEDRINE HCL

1. Mini Pink Heart	25 mg.
5. Mini White Thin or Thick	25 mg.
13. Small Red Cap	25 mg.

100 Lot	500 Lot	1000 Lot
\$7.00	\$17.50	\$25.00

### DIET AIDS

### PPA HCL

18. Large Red/Clear	75 mg.	
100 Lot	500 Lot	1000 Lot
<b>\$7.00</b>	<b>\$25.00</b>	<b>\$35.00</b>

### ALSO AVAILABLE

### DIPHENHYDRAMINE

10. Sleep Aids		50 mg.
100 Lot	500 Lot	1000 Lot
<b>\$8.00</b>	<b>\$25.00</b>	<b>\$40.00</b>

## ENERGY TABS & CAPSULES DIET AIDS SLEEP AIDS

ALL ORDERS SHIPPED  
WITHIN 24 HOURS  
CALL NOW—WE'LL  
BEAT ANY PRICE

## T&M DIST.

DEPT. RG 37, P.O. BOX 228  
COUNCIL BLUFFS, IA 51502

CAUTION: INDIVIDUALS UNDER MEDICAL CARE SHOULD CONSULT THEIR PHYSICIAN

around desperately, as if expecting someone to materialize and help her confront the movers; but the only person who emerged from inside the building was a man with a thumb-sucking child in his arms.

"Moving in, I see," he surmised. His glance swept over her, his eyes taking in her windblown reddish hair, piquant face, and small but sturdy frame. Andie could tell from the approving glint in his eyes that he liked what he saw. He was of medium height, with a lean, powerful build, and his attractive physique was enhanced even more by the classically simple, immaculate way in which he was dressed. He looked like an ad in a magazine, only better. Their eyes met, and a moment of recognition passed between them, of the kind that men and women have experienced for centuries, before the mover interrupted them.

"Okay, now," he began to calculate. "That's four flights with four men at twenty per man per flight."

"I suppose next you'll be counting how many steps to the fourth floor," Andie huffed.

"Fifty-three steps to the top floor the newcomer volunteered suddenly. "And they'll have to lift that couch over the pointed finials at each landing."

"Finials, huh?" The mover pondered. "I'd better go check that out." He bounded past her and inside the building.

Andie sighed angrily, but the man with the thumb-sucking toddler smiled as he stepped down so that he was on the same level with her. "I take it you're moving into the apartment above mine?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm Andie Maguire," she offered.

"George Demarest," he replied, extending a hand. "And this is Speedy."

Speedy looked at her with such disarming candor that she had to smile. He had a mop of brown hair and large blue eyes

that didn't blink.

"I'm charmed," Andie said to him, gripping a tiny fist. She looked at George. "How old is he?"

"He's two. And I'm late for a very important business lunch," he added nervously. He glanced down the street and looked at his watch.

"Expecting someone?" she asked.

"Oh—uh, my cousin Mindy," he answered. "The kid's mother. She asked me to watch Speedy for her," he explained. "She said she'd only be gone an hour."

"I'm sure your cousin will show up," Andie said.

"I'm not." He sighed. "That was three days ago."

Andie stared at him. "Are you serious?"

He didn't answer, and she realized that he meant it.

The burly mover reappeared. "Okay, lady," he said. "That'll be ten bucks per banister. So let's see what this all comes to. Twenty times four times—" He mumbled to himself, scribbling until he arrived at a figure. "That'll be another three hundred and fifty—in advance."

Andie almost choked.

"You're trying to cheat me."

"Hey," the burly man protested. "I resent that insinuation. I gotta make a livin'. Maybe ya want me to leave all your stuff out here on the sidewalk?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, no? Okay, lady, you asked for it. Let's go, guys."

He marched back to his truck and actually began carrying out his threat. She watched, appalled, as they started unloading all her furniture and belongings on the sidewalk, including her overstuffed couch.

"What are you going to do after they leave?" George asked her curiously.

Deflated, she said. "I'd need a pack of

mules to haul that up four flights of stairs."

"So what's it gonna be, lady?" the mover asked impatiently. "There ain't no mules around."

"No," she admitted. "There aren't any mules, but there are quite a few jackasses."

The burly man lost his temper. "That's it, lady. I don't need to stand here and be insulted." He turned to his men, "Get in the truck, we're leaving."

Without another word, the movers got in their trucks and left.

Andie looked doubtfully at the mess on the sidewalk. "Well, here goes nothing." She tried to lift the first box, but she could barely hoist it off the ground. "Ooff," she grunted, dropping it back down. She tried another box, this time managing to get it a few feet off the ground, but it was too heavy and she fell back onto the sofa, the box landing on top of her.

With Speedy hanging over his left arm, George easily lifted the box from her lap and placed it on the ground. "Mind if I join you?"

Andie sighed and gestured to the seat next to her. "There's plenty of room," she drawled.

George sat down and placed Speedy between them, eyeing her curiously. "My God," he said suddenly, "you *really* talk like that, don't you?"

Andie was confused. "What do you mean?"

"I thought you were just putting on that southern-girl routine for those crooks so they'd pity on you."

"Are you here to insult me or help me?"

"To help you, of course."

"Then quit dawdling and pitch in."

"Hmmm," he said with an assessing glint in his eye. "You certainly are impatient. I suppose you're a reporter or magazine writer of some kind, aren't

you?"

She became instantly defensive. "Why?"

"Because journalists work on tight schedules and always have deadlines. I have found them easily prone to making quick—and often incorrect—decisions."

"Well, I am a writer," she admitted reluctantly, ignoring his triumphant smile. "I'll be writing for a soap opera called *Until Tomorrow Comes*. I'm supposed to start work tomorrow morning. If I ever move in, that is."

Suddenly, Speedy started tugging on Andie's arm. "I hungwy!" the little boy cried.

George fished in his pocket and produced a small box of raisins, which Speedy immediately grabbed. The child stuffed his mouth with the raisins as George took a preliminary survey of Andie's entire stock of belongings.

"Hmmm, first we'll count the boxes." He made a quick count. "Fifty-eight," he noted. "Let's see, we'll leave the couch for last, the coffee table is easy, and the lamps are a snap."

"So?" Andie asked. "What's the verdict?"

George looked at his watch. "My appointment is at one o'clock. We have to have you moved in no later than twelve-thirty."

"Terrific," Andie said. "You've got it all figured out, but how are you going to accomplish it?"

George smiled engagingly. "I propose a contract. I get you moved in and you take care of Speedy for the afternoon. Do we have a deal?"

"Maybe," she hedged. "It depends on what time you're coming back. I'm having drinks with my new boss at three o'clock."

He looked at his watch again and contemplated. "Does it matter where you have drinks?"

She frowned. "Not really."

"Great, then I have the solution. You simply invite your boss to have drinks at the same place I'm having lunch. Bring Speedy downtown to the restaurant at five to three and we'll switch off. It's a snap."

"I don't know," Andie said worriedly. "It sounds kind of iffy to me. How are you going to get all of this up those stairs in an hour? It would take at least ten men."

He chuckled broadly. "You leave that to me."

"All right," she said slowly. "But you know, George, you really should have gotten a baby-sitter. You're not very good at planning things, are you?"

"What?"

"You should be more organized."

"Me, not organized?" he repeated. "Are you serious?"

Andie frowned. "You'll just have to reorganize your priorities and become more efficient. Learn to compromise between your time and Speedy's."

George was obviously swallowing his anger, because he leapt up suddenly, breathing hard, and leaned heavily against the railing of the steps. "I'm late for a million-dollar lunch appointment and you're giving me a lecture on child care—I don't believe this!"

"You need a lecture," Andie said calmly. "First of all, Speedy is hungry. Second, he's getting tired. I can tell by the way he keeps rubbing his cheek. And finally, you should have called a baby-sitter way in advance of your business lunch."

George muttered something unpleasant to himself.

"Just what do you do for a living, anyway?" Andie asked.

"I'm an efficiency expert."

Andie burst out laughing. "Well, you certainly could have fooled me."

"I have a very successful business," George informed her stiffly. "Look, we have sixty-four minutes left. Do we have a deal or don't we?"

"It's a deal," Andie said.

Only instead of beginning the arduous task of moving her in, George settled back on the couch again.

"Well?" Andie asked. "Shouldn't you get started?"

George smiled mysteriously. "I'm waiting for my help to arrive." Suddenly, George's eyes lit up in satisfaction. "Ah, here they come now."

Andie looked down the street. A group of about twelve high school boys in uniform was heading toward them.

"Hey, guys," George addressed them with congenial authority, "how'd you like to make a quick buck?" The boys stood together in a group, looking as if they always traveled in a pack. "A hundred and twenty dollars to move the lady in," George continued persuasively. "That's ten bucks a man."

That did the trick. A short, fat boy in front of the group spoke for them. "Okay, guys," he said abruptly. "Let's do it." Bedlam set in as each one ran for a box. They were racing for the stairs when George stopped them.

"Hold it, hold it, everybody!" He waited as the boys stopped in confusion and turned. "Let's get coordinated. I want three guys on each level. You'll pass the boxes to one another without having to climb up and down each flight."

Comprehension dawned on the twelve stubborn faces. "Hey, man, that's cool," one of them remarked.

"Yeah," the short guy said. "I'll take the top level." He stretched out an up-turned palm. "Keys, please."

Andie handed him her keys, and in a matter of minutes the boys were in position, three on each landing.

"Hey, lady!"

Something new under the sun . . . Unique and very, very beautiful!



# Sultry Lady SWIMSUIT

Joie de Vie™ Original . . . Created  
Exclusively for Night 'N Day™ Intimates

*A truly inspired classic . . . this wondrous asymmetrical design, created to give you the look of a sun goddess. The five-strap styling makes it unique . . . like no other suit you'll see here or abroad. A Joie de Vie™ original, yours from Night 'n Day™ Intimates exclusively*

*Five straps radiate from one shoulder, for a stunning sunburst effect front and back. The low scooped back, makes it especially alluring. Its curve-hugging nylon-Lycra® spandex, with shelf bra for comfortable support. Was a special value in our catalog at \$32.00*

**Choose Black or Turquoise  
Sizes 6 to 16. (M884171A)**

**\$14.85  
two for \$28.00**

## **Fully Guaranteed**

*To gather compliments everywhere you wear it—or return within 30 days for full refund of purchase price (except ship. & hdlg.). Our policy is to process all orders promptly. We charge your credit card only when order is shipped. Delays notified promptly. Shipment guaranteed within 60 days*

**—SATISFACTION GUARANTEED—MAIL TODAY!—**

**Night 'N Day Intimates, Dept. EM-1394  
Bldg. #23, Hanover, PA 17333**

Yes, please rush my *Sultry Lady Swimsuit* (M884171A), Imported, as indicated below, on full money-back guarantee.

BLACK \_\_\_\_\_ Size(s) TURQ. \_\_\_\_\_ Size(s)  
☐ One for only \$14.00 plus \$2.75 ship. & hdlg.  
☐ **Save More!** Any two for \$28.00 plus \$3.50 ship. & hdlg.

Enclosed is \$\_\_\_\_\_ (NV res. add sales tax)

**CHARGE TO MY:** ☐ Diners Club ☐ VISA  
☐ American Express ☐ MasterCard

Acct. No. \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_ (please print)

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

**Night 'N Day™  
Intimates**

HANOVER, PA.

17333

LICENSED TO UNIT-ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED  
© H.H.I., 1987

Andie craned her neck and saw the chubby kid's head leaning out of her window on the fourth floor.

"Here are your keys."

They fell haphazardly through the air, but George caught them easily, stuffing them into the pocket of his pants.

"Okay," he said, clicking a timer on his watch, "here we go."

One by one, George handed the boxes to the first boy, who in turn handed them to the second—and so on, until the chain was working smoothly.

After a few boxes, George checked his watch. "It takes approximately twenty-three seconds for a box to travel to the top." He looked at Andie and smiled serenely. "Six minutes."

Andie didn't believe it. "It can't be done," she said.

But George ignored her skepticism and handed another box to the next available kid. "Why don't you take Speedy upstairs?" he suggested casually. I'm in Apartment 3-F, right below you." He dug into his pocket and handed her a set of keys.

Andie started to head inside with Speedy.

"Oh, and there's a TV dinner in the oven that will be just about ready."

"You feed this child TV dinners?"

"They're good enough for me," he said, adding, "and very efficient."

She turned away, shaking her head as a box was passed around her and up the stairs.

"Oh, and Andie!"

She again turned slowly around to see him looking up at her.

"I took him down to Macy's yesterday and got him some clothes. You'll find clean overalls in the hall closet," he called up. "The diapers are in the old dumbwaiter on the wall. They work by an ingenious system of adhesive tabs. You don't have to worry about pins. It's really

quite—"

"I know, I know," she said wearily. "Efficient, right?"

Andie stood in the open doorway of George's apartment, awestruck. The place was dazzling, decorated entirely in white.

"This can't be for real," she breathed. "This isn't an apartment, it's an operating room." She poked around, finally discovering the dumbwaiter right next to the bathroom door. The shelf inside held a neat stack of diapers, cotton balls, and containers of baby powder. She wondered idly if the dumbwaiter still worked.

Suddenly, a loud bell began to ring in the kitchen, making Andie jump in surprise. "Holy cow!" she exclaimed. "What in the name of—"

Before she could do anything about it, George burst in. "The TV dinner is ready," he announced, heading straight to the kitchen. In one fell swoop, he silenced the alarm sitting on top of the refrigerator, retrieved the TV dinner from the oven, placed it in the freezer, and then reset the alarm clock.

"It will cool to the right temperature in two and a half minutes," he explained.

"Incredible," she mused. Testing him, she continued, "I'll bet you can even tell the exact time those kids will finish moving me in."

"They finished three minutes ago."

Andie's face almost fell, but George didn't stop to gloat. While she watched him with growing amazement, he sped into the bedroom.

"I'll be right out," he called. "I just have to change." The door closed for approximately one and a half minutes. Off went the alarm, and at the same instant out burst George, dressed in a dark blue suit. The pants he had been wearing before were draped over his arm, and he



quickly hung them over the doorknob before grabbing a tie. He adjusted his tie as he strode past her into the kitchen to turn off the alarm. "Okay, let's take that dinner out of the freezer and get that kid fed."

Out came the dinner, a cup of milk, and a bib. Before Andie could utter a word, George took three phone books down from a corner shelf and plopped them on a chair at the small table in the kitchen. Then he quickly transferred the food onto a plastic plate and cut everything into small pieces. Picking Speedy up, he deposited the child on the phone books, tied on the bib, and set the plastic plate in front of him.

"Okay, let me set you straight on where I'm having lunch." He marched into his bedroom and Andie could hear the clicking of an electric typewriter. When he came out he handed her a red 3 x 5 index card, neatly typed with the name, address, and phone number of the restaurant.

"A red index card?" she asked quizzically. "What's wrong with a white one?"

"It's all psychological," he explained. "Industrial psychologists did a study on color and human response. Red works best for appointments." He went back into his room to get something.

"But why did you type it?" she couldn't resist asking.

There was no answer.

"Uh, George?"

Out he came, carrying a briefcase in his arms and placed it neatly by the door.

"Better call your boss and tell him to meet you there at three o'clock," he ordered. "The phone's in the bedroom."

She obeyed automatically, venturing into the bedroom. It was just like the living room, only more practical. She picked up the phone and dialed the number of the studio. "This is Andie Maguire," she said brightly. "Is Mr. Collier in?" There

was a pause before a disgruntled voice came on the line.

"Collier here, what is it now?"

"Well, hello there," Andie said, summoning enthusiasm into her voice. "It's me, Andie Maguire."

"Who?"

"Uh, Andie Maguire," she repeated cautiously. "I'm your new writer—for *Until Tomorrow Comes*."

"Terrific," he said. "We can use some fresh blood around here." He stopped suddenly and asked, "Oh, wait a second, are you that kid from South Carolina?"

"Uh, yes, sir—North Carolina, actually. Do you remember now? We had an interview in Raleigh last month."

"So, when can you start?" Collier barked.

"Well," she said hopefully, "I thought we'd meet for a drink and, uh,—"

"A drink?"

"Well, last time we talked you said we should meet for a drink before I started work."

"Okay, that's fine by me." Collier said, sounding almost amused. "I'll meet you, 'say at two-thirty, at the Museum Cafe on Columbus—"

"No!" Andie said firmly.

"No? What do you mean, no?"

"I've got a better place to met," she explained hurriedly. "The '21' Club."

There was a long pause followed by a huge guffaw. "'21' Club?"

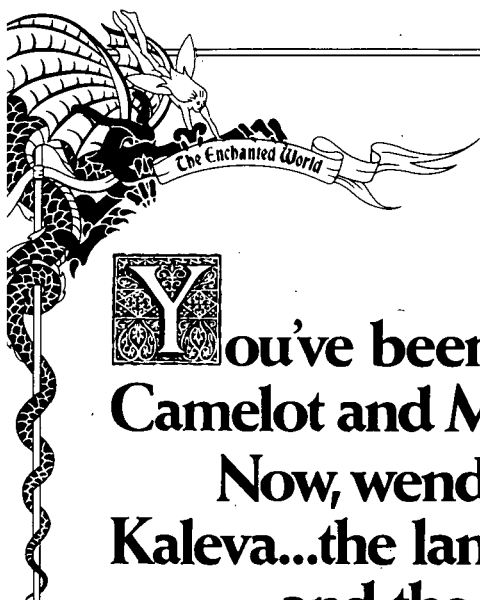
"Yes," Andie answered bravely after her boss had stopped laughing. "I have the address right in front of me. It's—"

"I know where it is," Collier interrupted.

"We can meet at three o'clock."

There was a long silence. "Uh, Mr. Collier? Are you still there?"

Again Collier began to chuckle. "Three o'clock," he repeated. "Okay, I'll see you at the '21 Restaurant' at three." He hung up, still chuckling, and Andie smiled



**Y**ou've been to Oz,  
Camelot and Middle Earth.  
Now, wend your way to  
Kaleva...the land of Taliesin...  
and the home of  
wicked Baba Yaga.

TIME-LIFE BOOKS introduces THE ENCHANTED WORLD.  
You have never seen lands as fabulous, creatures as amazing,  
heroes as bold or evil as unspeakable.

How often have you wondered about the legends of  
kingdoms where sorcerers prevail? Where elves, gnomes  
and sprites ply their magical  
powers. Now, you can stop  
wondering, because the

Editors of TIME-LIFE BOOKS

invite you to explore the realms behind  
the ancient legends: THE ENCHANTED WORLD.

A spellbinding volume will introduce you to these lands of  
enchantment: *Wizards and Witches*—a sumptuously beautiful book  
lavishly illustrated with full-color paintings and drawings, many  
newly commissioned from today's master artists of realism  
and fantasy.

You'll meet the legendary wizard Gwydion, who had  
the power to turn toadstools into horses and forests  
into entire armies.

You'll be entranced by the story of Baba  
Yaga, who fenced her garden with

©1984, Time-Life Books Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZIPPED  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

human bones. Your reading will abound with talismans, charms, runes and riddles.

We invite you to enjoy *Wizards and Witches* FREE for 10 days. Keep it by paying just \$14.95 (\$17.95 in Canada) plus shipping and handling. Afterwards, you can unlock more of the secrets THE ENCHANTED WORLD holds for you in such volumes as *Fairies and Elves... Dwarfs... Fabled Kingdoms... Dragons*.

Each volume brings you a luxurious collection of art and fascinating tales from a different realm. From encounters with the Loathly Lady... to visits in lands where winged horses soar over moonlit fortresses, knights embark on lofty quests and maidens cast spells with a glance.

Richly illustrated  
9 1/8" x 12 1/4" volumes  
Hardbound in  
handsome fabric  
with exquisite  
gilt-stamped  
ornamentation  
Books of time-  
less beauty and  
elegance to  
enhance any  
home library



Collect a volume one about every other month, always for free examination. There's no minimum to buy, you can cancel at any time, and, as with *Wizards and Witches*, return any volume within 10 days with no further obligation.

To enter this world, more magical than any you have ever known, mail the coupon today.



## Enter the World of WIZARDS AND WITCHES for 10 days FREE.

YES, I would like to examine *Wizards and Witches* free for 10 days. Also send me future volumes under terms described in this ad. You will be billed in advance of your first shipment.

### THE ENCHANTED WORLD

More than even you  
ever imagined.

**TIME  
LIFE  
BOOKS**

Mail today to  
TIME-LIFE BOOKS, Time & Life Bldg.  
Chicago, IL 60611

Name \_\_\_\_\_

(Please print)

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Apt. \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State or \_\_\_\_\_

Zip or \_\_\_\_\_

Province \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Prices subject to change

Orders subject to approval.

DYDXL3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uneasily as George came into the bedroom.

"So?" he asked. "Are we set?"

"I don't know about this, George."

He led her back into the living room, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back. His nearness was as commanding as his authoritative attitude. "What could possibly go wrong?"

"Everything," she said darkly.

"Look, I'll set the alarm on my watch for three, okay?" He meticulously set a tiny dial and marched over to the white sofa.

"Now for Speedy's bed." Picking up the cushions, he deftly pulled out the bed and lined up the cushions on both sides of the mattress. "This is so the little bandit doesn't fall off," he explained. "His blanket," he continued, producing a blue wool blanket from underneath the sofa, "and his pillow. *Voila!*"

Andie nodded, impressed. "I must admit, you do have a system."

"Of course," he said graciously, accepting her praise as if it were long overdue. "I *am* an efficiency expert, you know." Draping the pants he'd left on the doorknob over one arm and picking up his briefcase with the other, he opened the door with aplomb.

"Hey, George," she said suspiciously. "Three o'clock. On the dot. Don't forget, now."

He smiled condescendingly before shutting the door.

An hour and a half later, Andie was waiting for Speedy to wake up. She had managed a shower in George's awesomely clean bathroom with no trouble, and had wrapped herself in an oversized terry-cloth bathrobe. She still hadn't gone up to her apartment to get her clothes, and time was running short.

"Sorry, Speedy, but you're going to have to wake up now." She stroked his downy head tenderly, and a split-second

later the child was sitting upright and smiling as though he had never been asleep at all.

After changing Speedy, Andie shepherded him out the door and climbed the stairs to her own apartment. But when she got there, her heart dropped. "Oh, no!" she cried aloud. "George still has my keys!"

A wave of dismay shot through her as she realized what this meant. Running back down the stairs with Speedy balanced on one hip, she burst into George's apartment and made a mad dash for a phone.

"Hello, Information... is this Information? I need the number of Restaurant 21—yes, yes, that's it, the '21' Club."

She punched the buttons with shaking fingers. A man answered in haughty tones.

"'21' Club."

"George Demarest, please. He's—"

"Who?" The voice became slightly less haughty and definitely more rude.

"He's a patron there. He's having lunch there."

There was a pause. "Just a moment, please, madam," the voice intoned. "I'll see what I can do."

Finally, after several tedious minutes, the man came back on the phone. "I'm sorry, madam, but I have strict orders that Mr. Demarest does not wish to be disturbed."

"But you don't understand! He promised to take the baby, and—" Andie stopped, realizing that she wasn't making sense. "Never mind," she said and hung up.

"I hungwy." Speedy said, the moment she was off the phone.

Andy smiled wickedly. "Yes, honey," she said. "I'm sure they have something on the menu over at that 21 place."

The taxi driver pulled up directly in

front of the "21" Club. Andie paid the driver just as a uniformed man appeared and opened the door. He looked surprised at the sight of Andie in her jeans and raggedy T shirt, and he was clearly astonished when she calmly handed him Speedy. He took the child haplessly and waited for Andie to climb out before depositing him back in her arms.

The moment Andie had Speedy in her arms, she made a beeline for the door of the restaurant. The doorman ran after her but didn't catch her, managing to reach her only after she was already inside.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the maitre d' said as he approached her, "but you'll have to leave immediately." He took her arm firmly, and her grip on Speedy loosened.

"Oooh," Speedy cried as he spied a tray of food balanced on a passing waiter's upturned palm. "I hungwy now. I eat!"

In the next instant, Speedy wriggled free and took off in the direction of the waiter, with Andie and the maitre d' in hot pursuit.

They caught up with him halfway into the main dining room.

"Up you go, kid," Andie said as she scooped him up, oblivious of the surprised diners.

A hand closed around her arm once more, but this time it did not belong to the maitre d'. Andie looked up into the blazing eyes of George Demarest.

"Why didn't you change?" he hissed angrily.

Her temper flared, replacing her panic. "Because *you* took your pants with my keys in them, that's why, Mr. Efficiency Expert!"

George blanched, and by now all the patrons had become wildly interested in this personal drama unfolding in the middle of the restaurant.

"You locked me out of my own apartment, you fool! It's almost three o'clock.

I've got an appointment in less than fifteen minutes with my new boss."

"Fifteen minutes?" George repeated. "Now you'll see why I'm an efficiency expert. You'll go out now and buy a dress."

Andie stared at him furiously. "Are you crazy? In fifteen minutes?"

"Twenty," he countered. "You can be five minutes late," he reasoned, lifting Speedy and placing the child squarely on his shoulders. "Here's my charge card. Consider this my treat. Bergdorf's is only six minutes from here on Fifty-seventh and Fifth Avenue. Buy the first dress you see. Put in on there and hightail it back here."

"It can't be done," Andie protested.

"You're losing valuable time," George said as he pressed the timer on his watch.

---

She had no choice, really. She gazed at him wildly and then burst out the door. Sure enough, exactly six minutes later she was in Bergdorf Goodman's with George's charge card still in her hand, heading toward an elevator. She got off at the first floor that sold dresses and the first thing she saw was a sleek mannequin elegantly clad in a deep blue squarecut dress with large front buttons and dolman sleeves. "I'll take that in a size eight," she informed the first saleswoman she found. "Just hold it for me and I'll be right back. Can you tell me where the shoe department is?"

"Which one?" the woman asked.

"The closest," Andie pleaded. "quick."

"Uh, Plaza Two, just across the floor and to your left," came the puzzled response.

Andie was off and running.

"Will this be cash or—"

"Charge," Andie called out as she raced off in the direction of the nearest shoe department. In no time at all, she managed to pick out a simple pair of blue pumps

in her size. She grabbed the shoebox and ran back to the dress department. "Please," she begged the woman, "I've only got four minutes. Here's my charge card, start writing."

Without any questions, the saleslady went to work, taking only enough time to point out the direction of the dressing room.

Inside, Andie hastily climbed out of her jeans and T-shirt, tore off her sneakers, and stepped into the dress. It was a much more sophisticated dress than she usually wore, but now that she had it on, she liked it.

Thank God her handbag was presentable, was her last coherent thought as she raced out of the dressing room and over to the counter where the saleslady had the sale written up.

"Here you go, Mrs. Demarest," she said, giving Andie a jolt.

"What!? Oh, but I'm not—" She bit back the rest of the sentence. "Thank you," Andie managed to choke out, reaching for the pen. With a deep breath and a reckless shrug, she signed the receipt as Mrs. Andie Demarest.

A minute later, she found herself sprinting all the way back to the restaurant, the new shoes pinching her feet as she ran. "Ah, good afternoon, madam," the maitre d' said dryly as he consulted his appointment list. "You are . . . ?"

"Andie Maguire," she said. "I'm meeting a Mr. Collier."

The maitre d' found the name in his book. "This way," he said, "Mr. Collier hasn't arrived yet. Would you like me to escort you to your seat?"

"You mean he's late? After all I went through?" She almost burst out laughing, but she threw back her head and gathered all of her poise together as she followed the maitre d' through the glittering room. At that interesting moment, she caught sight of George. He was seated at a corner

table with an elderly man. And perched on the old gentleman's lap, busily engaged in devouring a cup of chocolate mousse, was Speedy.

George looked up as she passed and his face registered instant approval. He pointed surreptitiously at his watch with a conspiratorial wink. "Twenty minutes exactly," he mouthed to her. "I told you so."

His lunch companion turned, and it was obvious from his look that he was equally impressed with the poised and stylish young woman in front of him.

George hastened to introduce her. "Oh, uh, Mr. Shere, this is Andie Maguire."

Andie shook his hand, trying not to disturb the little boy on his lap.

"Now, if you'll both excuse me, I have an appointment." She reached out to shake George's hand and slipped him the receipt from Bergdorf's. "Take care."

George took the receipt and smiled. "It was my pleasure," he announced grandly. His keen eyes followed her as she followed the maitre d' to a centrally placed table. She sat down regally and had just enough time to take one deep, steadying breath before Lou Collier was shown to the table.

"So you're the new kid on the block?" the gruff voice asked.

She looked up and saw a large, balding man wearing baggy trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His suit jacket was crumpled carelessly over one arm, and he flung it over the back of his chair before sitting down.

"I'm Andie Maguire," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm delighted to meet you again."

"Yeah, I remember you now," he said, shaking her hand. "I'll have a Scotch on the rocks," he said to the waiter. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting," he apologized. "Things at the studio were insane today."



He glanced at his watch. "Geez, I'm late, kid. Sorry about that. Well, at least *you're* prompt. I like that in a writer. Good habit to have."

"Thank you," Andie said, smiling serenely. He should only know, she thought as she calmly ordered a white wine spritzer. She took a long, slow breath and suddenly caught sight of George, who was watching her from across the room. He lifted a glass as if in a toast, and she gave him a tiny smile before turning back to her new boss.

---

"This way, ma'am, Mr. Demarest is waiting for you." The doorman gestured to a sleek black limousine that was parked ostentatiously in front of the "21" Club and escorted Andie over to its imposing depths.

"No, I'm afraid you have the wrong person," Andie protested. "That's not my limo—"

The door opened unceremoniously, and George Demarest's head popped out. "Hi, Andie," he said cheerfully.

"What's going on now?" she asked blankly.

"We're celebrating," George informed her. "Come on in. I'm inviting you to dinner."

Curious despite her disapproval, Andie climbed inside the spacious limo. She leaned back against the plush maroon seat and stretched luxuriously. To George's right was a compact bar, where a champagne bottle sat in an ice bucket. Directly in front was a TV set which was tuned to *Sesame Street*, obviously for Speedy's entertainment. It seemed to be doing the trick, because Speedy's eyes were glued to the set.

George reached over, closed the door and poured two glasses of champagne. Andie sank back in total surrender as she took her glass.

George clinked his glass against hers.

"Here's to you," he proposed smoothly. "for helping me make the biggest sale of my life."

"Who, me?"

"Jeremy Shere overheard our entire conversation when you first walked in. When he saw you take off to buy the dress, he made me a promise right there. If you got back in the time I had allotted, he'd take me on as a consultant—for his entire company."

Andie's mouth fell open. "So you two were betting on me, is that it?"

He nodded smugly. "And you made it, right under the wire." George gave her a little pat on the hand that was probably meant to be friendly, but the look in his eyes was anything but fraternal and his hand rested for a long, provocative moment on hers before he took it away and asked, "How did *your* meeting go?"

Andie laughed. "My boss is unbelievable. He's the exact opposite of you."

"Oh, really?" George asked coolly. "In what way?"

The urge to tease him rose up within her, and she decided to take advantage of it. "Well, for one thing he's an untypical dresser," she began. "Unless 1960's styles ever come back in. He's also very abrupt. His office is probably a mess." She turned and gave him a mischievous smile. "Very disorganized."

George lifted an eyebrow. "As opposed to me."

"No one is opposed to you, George. Or even in your league at all," she added, widening her green eyes deliberately. "You're unique. One of a kind. Totally different."

"Oh. Is that good?"

"I'm not sure," she hedged. "I think sometimes this organization of yours actually works against you."

"There is nothing wrong with being organized."

"No, there isn't," she agreed. "But

you go beyond that."

"Give me one example," he challenged.

Andie pointed a playful finger at him. "Okay, I will. You file unsolicited mail." "So?"

She almost lost her cool. "You don't think there's anything strange about filing mail that was addressed to Occupant—in alphabetical order?"

"I think I should ask you what you were doing snooping in my files."

"I'm sorry I looked," she apologized, "but I couldn't resist. I never saw such a place in my life. Every object in your apartment seems to have been put there with incredible forethought. Your shoes are in three rows by two deep, your shirts all hang facing the same way, your pants are perfectly hung exactly one inch apart."

"I'm not asking you to live that way," he said. "But then again, I wasn't the one stuck with all my belongings out on the sidewalk this morning."

So now he was going to bait her, using the intractable tool of logic. Andie frowned.

"Don't sulk," George admonished. "It's so unbecoming. Especially on a woman as intriguing as you."

Her defenses stripped, she was barely able to do more than gape in surprise.

His hand reached for her arm, stroking it lightly. "Let's not play games, Andie. You are a very attractive woman. I'd like to kiss you right here," he murmured, his eyes assessing her slowly. "But I don't think I will," he concluded, taking a sip of champagne."

Andie found her voice. "Good heavens, George, we've only just met."

"True." His eyes sparkled. "But fate threw us together, and I plan to keep us that way until I find out why."

"Oh, really?" she gasped.

"I won't rush you," he promised. A

new twinkle stole into his eyes. "And it makes what I have to tell you a little easier."

Her heart lurched. "What?"

"Well, I have some good news and some bad news for you."

"It's that so?" she asked weakly.

"Bad news first," he decided. "You know those pants I was wearing this morning?" he began slowly. She nodded. "I dropped them off at the cleaners before I went to my meeting. The cleaners on Columbus Avenue that's only open until five Monday through Thursday during the summer?"

It took a few seconds to sink in. And then it hit home as she remembered the set of keys to her apartment that had been hastily dropped into the pocket of the pants in question. "Oh, George!" she cried. "You didn't!"

George shook his head ruefully. "It happens," he admitted.

"To an efficiency expert?"

"I was in a hurry. I guess I forgot to empty the pockets."

Andie couldn't hide her dismay. "You forgot?" she exclaimed. "The great George Demarest, who types messages on red three by five index cards, and files junk mail in alphabetical order?"

"Don't worry," he said briskly. "I'm sure they're still in my pocket. We'll pick them up tomorrow as soon as the place opens."

"Tomorrow?" Andie was aghast. "And where do you propose I sleep until then?"

George gave her a dazzling smile. "That brings us to the good news," he informed her. "Tonight, you'll be sleeping with me."

There was a small, weighted silence, broken finally by George. "Shall we make the best of it? I have exactly the same size kitchen you do. Would you like to try it out?"

"I thought I was invited to dinner," she answered.

"Are you actually willing to chance *my* cooking?"

She recalled the TV dinners and sighed. "You do have a point. All right," she announced, "tonight we'll have southern fried chicken. Which means we have to go shopping before the stores close."

George instructed the driver to drop them off on Columbus Avenue.

An hour later, Andie was relishing a scene of perfect domestic bliss. Speedy had eaten, had been given a bath and put into his pajamas, and she was in the kitchen, cooking up a batch of fried chicken, corn, and biscuits. Peering into the living room, she saw George reading Speedy a story.

She wished she could take a picture of them at that moment. A dark thought spoiled the picture. "George..." she said. "Have you—I mean, does anyone know that Speedy is here? Besides his mother, that is?"

He frowned. "No. Why should they? Whom did you have in mind?"

"I'm talking about the authorities, George. Have you faced the fact that Speedy is an abandoned child?"

"I don't know that he's actually abandoned," he said defensively. "This isn't the first time Mindy has pulled a stunt like this."

"It's not?"

"No," he answered rather smugly. "Mindy's never really been a mother to this kid. She got pregnant when she was sixteen, and her mother—my aunt Dorothy—took in Speedy and cared for him. Things would have been all right, but Aunt Dorothy died six months ago."

He looked down and realized that the child had fallen asleep. "Shh," George put a finger to his lips. Andie tiptoed over and carefully lifted Speedy up so that George could pull out the couch and

make a comfortable bed for him. When he finished, she laid the child gently down, and covered him with the blanket. They looked at each other for a long moment and then turned out the light and retreated into the kitchen.

George watched her with quiet appreciation and the hint of a smile as she prepared a salad. "Everything under control?"

She shot him a startled glance. Somehow it seemed that she should be asking him that question, and she said so. "You know, George, for a man who just had a tremendous responsibility dumped in his lap, you certainly are taking it all in stride." She studied him for a moment more and then bluntly asked, "Why?"

"Let's just say that Speedy and I have a common background, with one major difference," he said. "He knows who his mother and father are."

Andie's eyes widened in surprise, but George put up his hand and waved her reactions away. "There's nothing to get melodramatic about," he insisted. "I'm an adult."

Andie was still highly sympathetic. "It couldn't have been easy for you." She hesitated. "Do you... know where you were born?"

George shrugged. "I was told it was Appalachia or some such economically depressed area. My mother was not much older than Mindy. She gave me away when I was a month old."

Andie melted. "Then what happened?"

"I was put up for adoption, and was adopted in five weeks by Mr. and Mrs. Jonathon Demarest. They were a happy middle-class couple living in a typical middle-class suburb. I went to a typical high school, where I played basketball and worked on the school paper. I then went on to a typical American college. I settled in a typical big city and went about

pursuing the typical American dream. And lo and behold, here I am, standing in my kitchen, watching you cook me dinner. Now, what about you?" he asked curiously.

"Me?" Andie gave him a smile. "I'm just your typical southern belle. Until this morning, the biggest city I'd been to was Washington D.C., on a class trip in high school. I went to Duke University, where I majored in creative writing. After graduating, I landed a job writing for *The Uncle Wiggly Kiddy Hour* in Winston-Salem. I worked there until last Friday."

"So now you've hit the big time, right?" George asked.

Andie shrugged. "This new show has very low ratings and could be canceled. They need fresh ideas, and I guess you can't get fresher than me." She smiled at him and a silence settled between them, but it was a comfortable silence, heavy with promise. "Dinner's ready," she said softly a moment later.

"Good," he answered, but neither one of them moved. George came toward her, closing the inches between them, and suddenly he was kissing her, his hands pressing against her shoulder blades. His mouth sought hers with knowing determination, coaxing her and molding her into response.

When the kiss broke, they looked at each other for a long, timeless moment. Andie struggled to get a grip on herself. "The biscuits are ready," she said huskily. George said nothing but watched as she bent to retrieve them from the oven.

The table was set less than ten feet from where Speedy was sleeping, and they took care to tiptoe past him as they carried the food inside. George surveyed her handiwork appreciatively.

"Looks great," he said, "but before we sit down, I'd like to kiss you again." Andie was completely spellbound. Her lips parted unconsciously and her eyes half

closed as he placed his mouth over hers. The reverie was cut rudely short by a resounding shriek from the street.

"DARYL!! HEY, DARYL!"

"Oh, no," they groaned in unison, their eyes flying open.

Over on the couch, Speedy blinked a few times and shot upright in bed. He took one look at the dining-room table laden with food, and made an instant decision.

"I hungwy!" he announced. "I eat!"

"I seep now, Jord?" Speedy asked plaintively.

"He's tired," George translated after dinner was over. "He wants to go to sleep."

"Seep?" Speedy repeated earnestly as Andie picked him up. "Go seep?"

"Yes," Andie agreed. "As a matter of fact, we'll all go to sleep." She stopped in midsentence and looked around the apartment furtively, but George was oblivious of her concern.

He was busy clearing the table. Finally, he noticed her unease. "What are you looking for?"

"A good place for you to sleep." Her eyes challenged him. "You wouldn't happen to own a fold-out bed?"

"Sorry, but I only have one bed," he said. "I don't generally entertain overnight guests—who sleep in the next room, that is."

George extracted Speedy from her arms.

"Come on, kid," he whispered. "We've all had a very tiring day."

"Yes," Andie agreed fervently. She watched as George placed Speedy onto the couch and readjusted the pillows around him. She watched as George kissed the child softly, then tiptoed back to where she stood at the foot of Speedy's bed.

"Well, that's that," he whispered.

"I'm beat." He grinned at her mercilessly and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Bed-time." She returned his grin with a stony stare. George ignored her plight and sauntered into the bedroom. A second later, he reappeared with one of his fresh shirts, which he threw across the room to her. She caught it and watched wordlessly as he took off his own shirt as he strolled back into the bedroom, leaving the door open. She sighed heavily and retreated into the bathroom, locking the door.

She was able to stall for several minutes as she hid in the bathroom, getting ready for bed. But eventually she had to emerge, clad in George's crisp starched shirt, which hung only to the middle of her thighs. Speedy was out like a light, and George's bedroom was dark.

She stepped cautiously inside and felt a stab of dismay when she made out George's figure tucked neatly beneath the covers.

"George?" she whispered, but he didn't stir. "George, are you awake?" Still no movement. She hesitated and then strode boldly into the room and stood next to what was supposed to be her side of the bed.

She sat down carefully on the edge of the ultrafirm mattress and debated with herself. Suddenly, an idea came to her and she almost laughed aloud.

Of course, she thought gleefully. How very simple. And efficient! She restrained a chuckle, then proceeded to swing around and lie down on the bed—head to feet. She managed to pull the covers out from where they had been neatly tucked in at the foot of the bed, and snuggled beneath them.

"Good night, George," she said happily. "Pleasant dreams."

---

Andie's first week in New York was a kaleidoscope of new impressions. Her job was scary at first, then challenging, and

finally stimulating, as she met dozens of new people and settled into a routine.

George and Speedy remained a part of that routine. Somehow that first night had set a precedent, and she found herself having dinner with the two of them more often than not.

After the one hapless night together, she found that George, surprisingly, stayed at arm's length except for a few quick kisses on the landing. They became instant best friends, generally too harried or simply too exhausted to consider anything else. In all this time, Speedy managed to be the center of everything. And meanwhile, Mindy never phoned.

"You're going to have to face reality, George," Andie said on Friday. "You are not equipped to handle a two-year-old. It takes a permanent commitment, not to mention a realistic schedule and the patience of a saint."

They had just put Speedy to bed, and George stood over the sleeping child with haggard eyes.

"Well, you don't have to sound so sanctimonious," he said. "You'll have *your* chance starting tomorrow. Don't forget you promised to take care of him over the weekend."

Andie nodded. Speedy would be hers for two days while George went to Syracuse on business. She examined him sympathetically. "Face it, George, you need help."

"You mean a baby-sitter?"

"I'm talking about professional advice," she said. "I'm sure the city has specialized agencies equipped to handle this sort of thing."

"I'm all the help Speedy needs," he said. "If Mindy doesn't want her child, then I'll take care of him."

"How?" Andie tried to reason with him. "Look at yourself. You're exhausted, overworked, and frustrated. You can't do it alone. You need help, and

Speedy needs a real family, not an efficiency expert."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he growled, but he averted his eyes, unwilling to face her.

She threw her arms up in frustration. "You're avoiding the inevitable, George. Speedy has to be accounted for, sooner or later. You can't keep hiding out with him, without going through the proper legal channels."

"You make me sound like a criminal," he said. "What's the rush? When and if Mindy shows up, I'll deal with it then. In the meantime, why create problems?"

"That's just the point," she pressed. "What if Mindy suddenly shows up next year and wants her child back? Isn't it going to look awfully strange that you never reported it?" She sighed heavily. "The longer this goes on, the deeper the complications get."

"Don't you worry about complications," he said eyeing her coolly. "I'm an expert at complications."

"Oh, I've noticed," she said with a little smile, backing down a little. "Honestly, George, you're wonderful with him. I—I've never seen a man so tender and caring with a small child."

"Thank you," he said softly. He reached out and touched her hand, stroking it gently. "You know, it's been only one week, but I feel as if I've known you a lifetime."

"Listen to how quiet it is now," Andie noted after a lengthy pause.

They both looked over at the sleeping child, who was resting placidly with his thumb in his mouth. George leaned toward her and she met him willingly, her arms twining around his neck. The kiss was slow and mellow, as natural and right as the breath of summer in the air. His hard, smooth arms went around her, and she felt the crush of her breasts against his chest. It felt so wonderful to be with him

like this, exciting and sensual and yet somehow safe, all at the same time.

"Jord!" Speedy's little voice broke the silence.

"Oh, no," George groaned.

"Jord! I woke up!"

Andie smiled resignedly. "No rest for the weary," she quipped. "This wasn't the best time or place, anyway."

"I know that." He clasped her hand. "When I make love to you, Andie we'll be completely alone. And," he added huskily, "we'll take all the time in the world."

---

Monday morning on the set of *Until Tomorrow Comes* was the scene of a real-life crisis. The new star actress had just been injured in a weekend boating accident, and the entire day's script had to be rewritten by eleven that morning.

To make matters worse, George was supposed to have flown back to New York on Sunday night in time to relieve Andie of two days of baby-sitting. But the last she had heard from him, his plane had been grounded because of fog on the runway, and he had promised to take a train instead. By Monday morning, he still hadn't shown up, and rather than call in sick, Andie decided to chance taking Speedy to work with her.

Heading through the busy morning hallway, she managed to spirit Speedy into her office and close the door before anyone saw her. The next thing she did was to dial George's number and leave a message on his answering machine that she had taken Speedy to work with her.

She put down the receiver and looked at Speedy, who was playing with her Magic Markers. He had just drawn a crooked mustache on his upper lip and was busy adding sideburns when she interfered.

There was a sudden knock on the door, and Gail Conway came in. Gail had a small but durable part in the soap that had



kept her steadily employed for years. She already knew all about George, and seemed only mildly surprised to find a child sitting on Andie's desk.

"Don't ask," Andie said, scrubbing at Speedy's face.

"I'm asking." Gail charged in and plunked down, took Speedy onto her lap, and finished the job of cleaning him off while Andie regained her composure. "I take it this little one belongs to the infamous George," Gail said.

All Andie could do was nod miserably.

"What he needs," Gail injected, diverting Speedy with an eraser from the desk, "is a real baby-sitter."

"I guess he's afraid to leave Speedy alone with a stranger," Andie said, avoiding Gail's eyes.

"Well, I'm no stranger," Gail said cheerfully. "Could you two use a free Saturday night?"

Andie's face lit up with gratitude. "You'd do that, Gail?"

"Sure, for a small favor."

"Name it."

"In exchange, you have to rewrite the script so that I don't have to marry that creep of an actor Lou just hired.

"I don't know," Andie said hesitantly, causing Gail to stab herself with an imaginary knife. She thought it over. The prospect of a night alone with George was very tempting. She looked up at Gail and smiled. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe I can have you catch the creep two-timing you."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, from the depths of my heart. But right now you have a bigger problem." Gail grabbed Speedy's fist, which was about to smear Magic Marker over that week's script. "I'll take Speedy off your hands right now, and he and I can get acquainted. By the way," she continued. "Just out of curiosity, what are you going to do about our missing character? You

can't write Fredonia out yet. She was supposed to be a big deal."

"Well," Andie mused, "we can always conveniently get her into a car accident, wrap up another actress in face bandages, put her in a hospital bed, and keep her in a coma until the real star is ready to go back to work."

"Which leaves you short of a main plot."

Andie scrunched her face as she toyed with a few ideas. "All we need is a new element to push the plot forward. Maybe a little mystery."

Their thinking was cut short by Speedy, who somehow managed to tip over all of Andie's pens and pencils. They spilled onto the floor, causing him to cry in frustration. Andie looked at him and sighed. "You wouldn't have ideas, would you, Speedy?"

"Crayons!" he said, pointing down at the mess.

Suddenly, Andie's whole face changed. She was looking at Speedy as the wheels in her head began to pick up speed. "Oh, Speedy, you are wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Gail was about to open her mouth when Lou Collier came storming through the door without knocking.

"Hey, Maguire," he barked. "We have a meeting at eleven. Let's move it."

"I think I came up with something already, Lou," Andie explained excitedly.

Collier lifted a brow. "Okay, let's hear it—and it better be good. I've got no time for mistakes." He turned to lean against the wall and saw Speedy for the first time. "Hey, what's this kid doing here?"

"He's our newest addition to the plot," Andie said, covering quickly. She went on with her idea without missing a beat. "Fredonia's been gone for two years, right?" Collier nodded curtly. "Well, unknown to anyone else, she had a baby

two years ago, and has been raising it secretly. But now she's in the hospital in bandages and might die. The big question is—what do we do with the child?"

"Yeah, what do we do?" he asked suspiciously.

"The answer is, the father has to take it. But the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is—who's the father?"

Gail nodded supportively. "Sounds good to me. But I'm just a player. What do you think, Lou?"

Collier nodded slowly. "Yeah," he agreed thoughtfully. "Not bad at all. We can do a whole thing where if the real father doesn't come forward, the kid has to be put up for adoption. It'll be a real tear-jerker." He straightened up and clapped his hands together, obviously relieved. "Good work, Maguire. The next thing you have to do is call the city office for abandoned children, and get all the info you can. I want to make this as authentic as possible."

He paused for a moment. "I have one more thing to ask you. How'd you get the kid here so fast?"

Andie gulped. "Uh—do I have to answer that?"

Collier thought quickly. "No," he said. "Just make sure you show up in my office in fifteen minutes with the information I need. Oh, and have the kid's parents sign the release forms."

Andie nodded weakly and waited for Collier to leave before falling back in her chair in a cold sweat. "Phew," she breathed, wiping her brow.

"Nice going," Gail said. "You just killed three birds with one plot. Speedy has a reason for being here, the script is saved, and you and George get a night off, compliments of your truly." With that, she picked up Speedy and headed for the door. "I'll take the kid, you get on the phone, and then you'll be free for your meeting."

Andie took a deep breath and reached for the phone book. But she barely had a chance to open it when there was a knock on the door. "Come in!" she called, without looking up.

"Hi," said a familiar voice. She looked up, startled. There stood George, obviously winded.

"I finally made it," he said, looking around her office. "Uh, where's Speedy?"

"He's with my friend Gail down the hall."

"Terrific, I'll just head over and get him, and be on my way."

"Oh, no, you won't," she said quickly. "You won't believe what's going on here." Andie stood up and walked briskly around her desk to face him. "Now, listen, and don't talk until I'm finished."

But George couldn't stop. "Look, I'm sorry I'm late, but I couldn't get a train, and—"

"George, please! Just sit down!" She pushed him into the chair in front of her desk and stood over him. Before she could stop him, he reached up and pulled her onto his lap.

"George, I can't now," she protested, but her tone was weak and she knew it.

"What's the matter?" George asked. "What's the big rush?"

She lifted the script from her desk and waved it in front of his face. "This," she said. "I've got only two hours left to rewrite it to include Speedy, so let me go."

George put the script on his lap and drew her into his arms and kissed her, letting the heavy script fall to the floor. Andie's head fell back in surrender as his tongue found its way into her mouth, and she clung to him hungrily.

"You know something?" George asked as he dropped a series of tantalizing kisses along the side of her neck. "This is the first time you and I have been alone together. No Speedy. I like it."

"I'm glad you like it," Andie said, "because I have a surprise for you. Dinner at my place, Saturday night," she announced. "Minus one child."

"What?"

"You heard me. This is strictly an adult affair. Gail will baby-sit, and you will show up at my door promptly at eight. Until then, I'm afraid I won't have much time for you or Speedy."

"Then how about one more for the road?" he asked.

"It will have to be a good one to last a whole week," she answered breathlessly.

Their mouths met in an uprush of longing. George crushed Andie against his hard, lean body. Then his hands slid down the sides of her body, molding it possessively, and at last they settled provocatively on her hips. They were just beginning another rapturous kiss when the door banged open.

"Hey, Maguire!" Lou Collier shouted, unannounced. "Where the hell is that kid's mother? I need this contract signed, and—"

Andie jumped off George's lap. "Lou!" she exclaimed. "You could at least knock."

Collier looked at George without acknowledging Andie's remark. "Who are you?"

George didn't miss a beat. "Why, I'm the kid's mother, of course."

There was a long moment of silence, then Lou jerked a thumb at George. "Well, follow me. I need you to sign this release form. We'll just use your kid for today's show." He turned to Andie. "Did you get that information I asked for?"

"Right away," she answered crisply. "I just got a little... sidetracked."

"Yeah, well, get moving. The other writers are already going over your idea." He crooked a finger at George. "Come on, sidetrack," he said. "In my office."

She watched them leave, George turn-

ing to wink before the door closed. Although it was going to be a long week, her spirits lifted as she thought about the weekend.

Andie picked up the phone book and looked up the appropriate child welfare agency. She located the number she was seeking and dialed it, a nameless discontent making her feel suddenly cross.

A voice answered mechanically, and all at once everything fell into place. Her hand shook for a moment and the receiver rattled back into the cradle. Whom was she kidding? Maybe this call was supposed to be for research purposes only, but deep down she knew that she and George couldn't continue this farce with Speedy any longer.

Something had to be done. Speedy's mother had to make some kind of concrete decision about her child, once and for all. Something else occurred to Andie as she considered Mindy's disappearance. Maybe Mindy hadn't contacted George because something had happened to her.

Resolutely, Andie picked up the phone and dialed the number once more. "Uh, yes, hello. Is this the New York Department of Children's Social Services?" she asked. "My name is Andie Maguire," she began cautiously. "I'm inquiring about the legal process of what to do when a child is—"

She stopped. Did she really have the right? She remembered George's fierce determination to keep Speedy at all costs. But would doing this really prevent him from doing just that? It was entirely possible that they would gladly let him keep Speedy, that he would have no trouble at all proving his sincerity and his worth.

She took a deep breath and continued. "Uh, yes, I'm still here." Gathering her courage together, she spoke clearly into the phone. "I'd like to report an abandoned child."

After putting in a seventy-hour work week, Andie collapsed on her bed Friday evening and didn't wake up until almost noon the next day. She had conveniently managed to push the call to Social Services aside, pretending for the time being that she hadn't interfered. The woman she had talked to had been calm and sympathetic, and had made it clear that several days would probably go by before anything would happen.

After a hearty breakfast, she got dressed and shipped down the stairs until she was standing on the street. She turned toward Columbus Avenue. The first item on her list was a dress that would knock the socks off Mr. Perfectionist himself, George Demarest.

That pleasant task took over two and a half hours of trying on fourteen outfits in eight different stores, but it was worth it. Finally, she settled on a black sleeveless jumpsuit that was cinched in at the waist to show off her petite figure.

Checking her watch, she saw that it was already after four. She hurried to buy the ingredients for tonight's feast and rushed home with all of her packages in tow. By seven o'clock, the gumbo was simmering, the rice was boiling, and Andie Maguire's famous pecan pie was cooling on the windowsill.

George was already twenty minutes late when a disgruntled Andie finally decided to go downstairs to his apartment. When she knocked on his door, Gail answered it.

"Well, hi," Andie said dubiously.

"Hi, yourself," Gail snapped.

Andie hesitated. "Uh, is there something the matter?"

"In a nutshell—yes." Gail held up five different-colored index cards. "Do you know what these are?"

Andie shrugged. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Gail answered. "But he's

managed to cover every kind of emergency, from swallowing poison, to cuts, broken bones, head injuries, and asphyxiation." Gail held up the other cards. "Want to guess at the rest of these?"

Andie took them from her and glanced through them quickly. George had managed to cover everything from double-boiler bottle-warming to a list of Speedy's favorite bedtime stories.

"Honestly, Andie," Gail complained. "This guy's a good case for the nut farm."

Suddenly, George called, "Oh, Gail, would you come here a second? I just want to show you how the phone works. I've preprogrammed the emergency numbers."

Gail looked at Andie and sighed. "See what I mean? He's crazy."

"I'll handle this." Andie pushed her aside and marched into George's bedroom. Speedy was in his arms, and after taking the child from him, she said, "George Demarest, this is absolutely ridiculous. Now, are you coming, or do I have to drag you out of here?"

He looked at her sheepishly. "I guess I'm behaving like a nervous parent, huh?"

"It's a normal reaction," Andie said, softening. "So what do you say? Shall we leave now?"

At those words, Speedy's face suddenly changed. "You go out, Jord?"

"Uh-oh." George's face also changed. "I think he's experiencing separation anxiety."

"No go, stay, stay," Speedy pleaded.

"Maybe we ought to eat down here and—"

"NO!" Andie's loud voice made Speedy jump in alarm. "Are you crazy, George? It's our first night alone together. Don't spoil it."

"Jord! You go out?"

George looked tenderly at Speedy, who

stretched his little arms out. "Why don't you leave first, George," Andie suggested. "I'll stay here and talk to Gail and then meet you upstairs."

"No!" Speedy cried.

"Go, already," Andie ordered George and then gave him a push, sending him out the door. As soon as George was gone, Speedy buried his face in Andie's shoulder, crying as if his heart would break. She comforted Speedy until he began to calm down. "Well, I guess I'd better get going myself," she said unconvincingly.

She tried handing Speedy over to Gail, but the same scene was reenacted with even more difficulty.

"Andie! No go, no go, no go!" Speedy sobbed. "Nooo!" he sobbed, and tried to get hold of Andie's leg, but Gail was faster.

"Bye-bye," Gail said firmly, opening the door.

Andie hesitated. "Maybe George is right."

"Oh, no, not you, too!" Gail said. "Get out of here." Gail marched her to the door and rudely shoved her out into the hall, slamming the door behind her. Andie was left standing alone in the hallway, listening to Speedy's cries. But when she turned shakily to head upstairs, there was George waiting on the landing, looking as guilty as she felt.

They stood listening to Speedy crying and stared at each other wretchedly. Neither spoke for a moment. Then a wave of relief swept over them as the crying slowed down and finally came to a halt.

Andie took a deep breath. "I guess he's all right," she said, trying to laugh.

"You look great," George said.

She went to him and they embraced lightly. "Let's go," she whispered. Holding hands, they dashed up the stairs like two kids playing hookey from school.

"Hey, this is beautiful," George said as

he sat down and admired the table she had set. "I'd say this is going to be a first-class evening."

"With no interruptions," Andie added.

He took her hand and squeezed it. At that exact moment, Speedy let out a cry down below, making them both jump. They exchanged concerned looks and waited for more, but no sound came.

"Gail can handle Speedy," she assured him. "Shall we eat?"

They gave each other a slow, private smile. The whole evening lay ahead of them, ready to unfold its delights.

Andie headed toward the kitchen for the first course, but stopped abruptly at a series of bangs that emanated from somewhere in the building. This was followed by an enormous thump. Andie and George both jumped in alarm.

"Speedy fell off the couch," George announced ominously. "Let's go." He leaped up and headed for the door, his keys already in his hand, with Andie in pursuit.

They burst in upon a very surprised Gail. She was sitting on Speedy's bed, reading him a story. On the floor were three other books, clearly the source of the falling sound they had heard.

Speedy took one look at them and tried to rush toward them, but Gail stopped him.

"Out!" Gail ordered them as she wrestled with Speedy. "I mean it. If you two so much as show your faces here one more time, I'll quit." She ushered them back into the hall, snatching George's keys out of the lock. "I'm locking you out for the night." Her face lit up in a coy smile. "I'm also taking the phone off the hook."

Speedy was still crying when Gail slammed the door in their faces.

They listened, reassured, as Gail managed to calm Speedy down.

"If we're going to live through this night," George said somberly, "we will have to take our minds off Speedy by concentrating very hard on one thing."

"And what's that?" Andie whispered.

He pulled her into his arms. "This," he said, kissing her with sensual deliberation.

---

George leaned back in his chair, the picture of satisfaction. "That was the best meal I've ever had, and I only thought about Speedy once. Okay, twice."

Andie laughed. "I think we're cured," she said.

"You know what I could use right now?" he asked. She shook her head. "A nice cordial. Do you have any?"

"Coming right up." She stood up and headed toward the kitchen, but before she could get past him, he reached out and pulled her onto his lap. They kissed, fired with an excitement that had been slowly building all evening—all week. "Mmmm," she purred as the kiss ended. "Better than a cordial." Her eyes fell on the table. "Let me just get rid of this mess," she whispered, "and the remainder of the evening's agenda will be up to you."

He laughed seductively. "Fair enough. But I'll take care of cleanup. After all, you were the chef. Why don't you go ahead and I'll join you in a moment." He kissed her again. Andie squirmed deliciously on his lap and at last slid off, running off toward her bedroom.

The methodical clinks and bumps of an efficiency expert clearing the table were the only sounds in the small apartment as Andie slipped inside her bedroom and closed the door. She tiptoed to her closet and reached toward the back, seeking a sexy garment she had bought but never worn. She quickly slipped out of her clothes and got ready for George, who was just turning off the water in the kitchen.

Andie was stretched out on the bed when he appeared in the doorway, peering inside. "I can hardly see you," he whispered. "It's so dark."

"You'll get used to the dark. Come in, George."

He made his way slowly to the bed and sat down. "You're like a mirage. That thing you're wearing—what is it?"

"It's a nightgown, George. Do you like it?"

"I like it very much," he said hoarsely as his hand began gently lifting the hem. "But I'll like it even better when it's off."

His hands grazed her body as he lifted the scanty garment, pulling it gently over her head. She watched his eyes ignite as he looked at her body, thrilled with her power to excite him. "Beautiful," he whispered.

George slipped out of his clothes quickly, letting Andie rake her hands down the smooth, hard planes of his chest. All at once his strong, hard body was covering hers, dominating her with its urgency. His mouth left a trail down her neck, across her breast, bringing her to a pinnacle of desire that made her moan and shake with need. Andie drank in the waves of feeling until she could bear it no more. George's strong arms tightened around her, holding her close, and together they spun wildly out of control.

They were silent for many moments afterward, George's arms still enclosing her protectively. Her mind continued to float effortlessly, but one thought stood out with lovely clarity. This moment was beautiful, she thought. Absolutely and utterly beautiful.

When Lou Collier burst into her office on Monday morning, Andie was lost in thought. She had fallen in love with George Demarest, but had failed to tell him about her fateful call to Social Services.



She looked up at her boss. "Oh, good morning, Lou."

Lou Collier, who was used to people jumping to attention when he came barging into an office, was clearly taken aback. "Hey, Maguire, are you all right?"

"Mmmmm," was all she said.

"Well, I've got bad news for you. I need you to do another rewrite. Fredonia isn't coming back on the show for at least six months." He stopped when he realized that his words were having absolutely no effect on her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lou. Did you want something?"

Lou gave an exasperated sigh and threw up his hands. "What's going on around here?"

"Say, Lou," Andie ventured. "Can I confide in you?"

"Okay, okay, what is it? Make it quick," Lou said as he sat down.

Andie gave him a wan smile. "I don't even know how to begin." She hesitated.

"Try English," he quipped.

She took a deep breath and told him the entire story of George and Speedy, leaving nothing out. Lou listened with a slight frown, but she had the comforting feeling that he was taking her seriously.

"Are you asking my advice?" She nodded. "You've got to tell him you called Social Services, and tell him why," he said. "My suggestion is that you do it fast before they pay him a surprise visit. You can't inform on the guy and then expect him to love you at the same time." She nodded, lost in thought.

"And that's enough advice for the lovelorn," he said decisively. "I need a rewrite on that hospital scene. Have it on my desk before noon," he ordered. "Then take the rest of the day off."

Her face lit up with gratitude. "Oh, thank you, Lou. That's really—"

"No, it's not," he cut in. "Don't tell

me I'm nice. I can't handle it." He stood up and stalked out.

George was surprised to see Andie at his door at noon, but he welcomed her with a kiss.

"I was expecting a new file cabinet to be delivered," he murmured, "but this is much better."

She picked up a large shopping bag she had left on the floor in the hall. "I brought lunch," she announced, marching inside. "I have the whole afternoon off."

He took the bag into the kitchen. "So what's the occasion?" he asked. "You never get home early."

Panic gripped her. She couldn't tell him yet. She improvised quickly. "It's our anniversary today," she gulped. "We've been going steady for two whole weeks."

"Has it been that long?" George quipped. "My, my, how time flies."

Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

"That must be my file cabinet," he said reluctantly and got up and buzzed the downstairs front door.

The sudden quiet jarred Andie into a realization: Where was Speedy? "Hey Speedy? Where are you?" She glanced toward the kitchen and caught sight of the little boy as he climbed deftly into the old dumbwaiter.

"Sorry, Speedy, but you can't play in there." Shaking her head, she started over to retrieve him when she suddenly perceived a barely noticeable movement on the old pulleys. Her heart in her mouth, she made a lunge for Speedy just as he yanked on the ropes.

At that moment, George turned and stepped back. "He's at it again," he said, unaware of the danger.

Andie crashed into him, her lunge broken by his sudden interference. "quick!" she cried. "Get him!"

"Oh, my God," George exclaimed, turning, but it was too late.

Speedy's grubby hands gave a decisive tug, and the dumbwaiter jerked up, disappearing behind the wall. "Speedy!" Andie screamed. George threw himself at the opening, reaching up.

"It's heading for my apartment," Andie said in alarm. She was out the door and taking the stairs three at a time, her keys already in the lock and turning by the time she banged her door open. George was right behind her, racing toward the dumbwaiter shaft and tearing the door open.

They looked up warily and saw Speedy sitting calmly in the dumbwaiter, which bounced uneasily with his every move. His little fists were playing with the ropes, and they sensed that any sudden movement would propel him into pulling on them.

"Get him, George!" Andie exclaimed as he scrambled over to retrieve the child.

"I will," George vowed, inching forward. "I just don't want to scare him. Don't move."

Speedy looked up with interest as George made his approach. Suddenly, a loud shout from down below made him jump in alarm. "Hello, up there! Anybody home?"

Andie turned, disconcerted, and saw a thin, earnest young man in a gray plaid suit standing on the landing. "Hi," he said in a nasal voice. "Is this Demarest Consultants?"

"Shh!" she hissed. "We have an emergency here."

The man looked up in time to see George carefully reaching for the child in the dumbwater. The mechanism bounced slowly up and down, making Andie hold her breath.

"Oh, my God!" the man yelled.

That did it. Speedy reacted to the excitement by giggling wildly and tugging at the ropes. In a moment, he was once again out of sight.

George lit a match and peered down the dusty shaft. "I can see the dumbwaiter," he said as the rope continued to move. He studied the rope for a moment and blew out the match, looking at Andie with sudden confidence. "Why didn't I think of it before?" he asked, his face lit with a new idea. And waving them back, he began to pull gently on the rope to slow it down. "It's stopping," he said tensely. The stranger stepped forward curiously.

"Pull," George commanded him. "Come on, help me."

The stranger obligingly grabbed the rope, and the two men pulled in unison. "I think I see it," George said. "Yes, that's it. Keep pulling—it's almost here."

Andie ran over, stood next to them and grabbed Speedy when the dumbwaiter arrived.

George looked at Speedy for a long time and shook his head. "Well, I guess you think I'm very irresponsible."

"It's my fault, too, George," Andie broke in. "I should have moved faster."

"No," George insisted. "It's all my fault. I should have checked to make sure that dumbwaiter was safe before using it as a closet."

Andie was stricken by the dismay on his face. "Don't be so hard on yourself, George. You've been trying to do the impossible. No one can run a business and take care of a two-year-old—not without help. It was inevitable that Speedy would have an accident. We were lucky this time."

"But what about the next time?" George said. "Let's face it, I'm not fit to take care of him."

Andie wanted to console him, but the scare they had just had sobered her. She was nodding miserably, when the stranger coughed.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," George said, looking up. "You have a delivery for me?"

"Delivery?" The man shook his head wearily. "No, I have no delivery. I'm Morty Carlson."

"Oh. Well, thank you for your help, Morty," George said, extending a hand. "I'm happy to have made your acquaintance."

"Oh, I don't think so," Morty said dryly, ignoring the proffered hand. "Especially after the conversation I just overheard."

Andie and George stared at him, bewildered.

"I'm not a delivery man. I'm from Social Services."

---

George stood like a statue next to the mantel of his apartment for the whole two hours that Morty Carlson conducted his preliminary investigation. He never moved once, not even when the Social Services investigator asked a question or made a point. Every time Andie tried to intervene, George cut her off abruptly or ignored her altogether. Speedy lay quietly in the next room, blissfully unaware that his future was being charted as he slept.

"I'll need a picture of your cousin Mindy," Morty said. "Also, an affidavit from your lawyer, proving your relationship to Speedy."

"You'll have it on your desk tomorrow morning at nine o'clock sharp."

Andie spoke up. "And what if Mindy can't be found?"

"Yes," George said without looking at her. "Does that mean I can adopt Speedy?"

"It's tricky," Morty said. "The laws are funny about these things. If you were a woman, it would be easier."

"But that's not fair!" Andie cried.

"Maybe so," Morty said primly. "I'm not giving you my personal opinion, I'm just telling you what kind of thinking to expect." He looked at both of them, tallying their reactions. "Well," he said, stan-

ding up, "I must be going." He started for the door but turned back, his face softening a little. "May I make a suggestion?"

George's face was a stone mask. "Please do."

"This apartment," Morty said. "It needs some work to become a proper environment for a two-year-old." He flipped through the pages of his clipboard. Removing a pamphlet, he handed it to George. "This will help you to childproof so that accidents such as the unfortunate one we had a few hours ago won't recur."

George nodded, and Morty held out his hand. "Good day to you both," he said. George shook Morty's hand and held the door open as the social worker stepped out.

There was a long silence as they listened to Morty's diminishing footsteps. Andie looked at the floor until she could hear the front door closing. When she looked up, she saw that George was still holding the door open.

"Phew," she said. "That was tough, huh?"

George said nothing.

"Please don't look at me that way, George."

"Get out," he said sternly, holding the door open.

"Please, George, I only meant to help."

"Out!" He repeated the command bitingly. "Now!"

Tears welled in her eyes, tears of frustration as well as sadness. "I know I did it behind your back," she pleaded, "but I was thinking of you as well as Speedy."

"I don't want to hear it," he snapped. "I'm waiting."

She stood up and walked toward the door, trying desperately to maintain her poise. The moment she was outside, the

door slammed behind her, and she ran up to her apartment and burst into tears.

That was the last she saw of George. The rest of the day was spent in on-and-off-again tears and self-criticism. After calming down somewhat by evening, she tried calling him, but all she got was his answering machine. She dragged herself to work the next morning and spent the rest of the day lost in the doldrums. By three o'clock, she hadn't accomplished a thing except to feel even more miserable. Resting her head on the desk, she thought about George's angry face once again and let two large tears roll down her cheeks.

Lou Collier chose this inauspicious moment to barge into her office. "Hey, Maguire, that stuff you wrote this morning stinks."

Andie looked up at him, her face still wet with tears.

"Aw, now," he retreated, "you don't have to cry over it. I know you can do better. After all, last week's script was terrific."

"Thank you, Lou," she said. "I'm not crying over criticism, at least not yours."

Collier folded his arms and sat on the edge of her desk. "Don't tell me that efficiency character of yours is still giving you a hard time."

She nodded sadly.

"What happened, he found out you squealed before you could tell him yourself?" Another miserable nod. "You know what your problem is?" Lou demanded.

She shook her head. "No, what?"

"Your problem is you're all upset over this. *He's* the one who should be upset."

"Oh, he is, believe me."

"What I mean is, you've got nothing to apologize for. You only did what you thought was right. Let *him* come and apologize to *you*."

Andie let out a long, shaky sigh. "I don't know, Lou. I don't think he'll come

at all. I may have gone too far for that."

"Yeah, well, then you have to make it happen. You have to create the circumstance that leads him to you."

"And how do I do that?"

Lou smiled. "You're the writer. Go figure it out."

By the time she got home, she had created six different excuses for seeing George, all of them rotten. There was nothing to do but sit curled up in an armchair and wait for something to happen. A half hour later, something did. The doorbell suddenly rang.

"George!" she said aloud, running over to answer it. But instead of George, it was a burly man with a huge box.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I got this delivery here for a Mr. George Demarest—only he ain't home."

Andie looked beyond the man and down the stairs, where two other men waited with a large box.

"If you wouldn't mind?" He held out a paper for her signature.

"Oh, I guess I can sign for it." Without looking at what she was signing, Andie took the pen and scribbled her name on the dotted line.

Fifteen minutes later, her living room looked as if she had just moved in all over again. Boxes were stacked everywhere, some of them larger than her own furniture.

Curious, she picked up the delivery slip and read it. "Baby World," she said aloud, and went down all the items, checking them off. There was everything from a small bed and a dresser to a high chair, an indoor child's swing, and even a rocking horse.

Well, at least now she had an excuse to see George again, she thought hopefully. Maybe by now he had cooled down somewhat. But when she bravely went down the stairs later that night after hearing him come in, she was sorely disappointed.

"Hello," she called in cautiously. "George? It's me, Andie. Are you there?"

"I'm here," an angry voice answered from the other side of the door.

There was an awkward pause. "Uh, George?" Andie tried again. "Could we talk?"

"What do you call what we're doing now?"

"Can't we talk face-to-face?"

The door unhinged and opened slowly to reveal George looking utterly disheveled. He had a screwdriver in his hand and behind him lay more unopened cartons of all sizes. She saw that his bedroom door was closed and surmised that Speedy was inside, sleeping on George's bed.

"I'm putting up some shelves," he explained in response to her puzzled glare. "They have to be high enough to keep Speedy from reaching them." He glanced at the guidelines Morty Carlson had given him. "Five feet high, and away from anything that can be climbed on."

Andie looked back at his living room wall, where the mirror had hung. There was a series of holes drilled in the wall, and a half dozen wooden shelves were leaning against it.

"What do you think?" George asked, apparently still reluctant to make conversation but too curious for an opinion to refuse to talk to her. "Is that high enough to pass inspection?"

"Inspection?" Andie asked weakly.

"Yes, inspection. Ever since you informed on me, I've been out trying to get everything I need to qualify as a temporary guardian." He looked at her furiously, his anger mounting once again. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy."

"Look, I'm sorry," she said.

"Out, now." He held the door open.

Andie simply wasn't going to allow this. It wasn't fair to her. She stole a glance at him and saw that he still looked

perfectly immovable. But she couldn't believe that he really meant to throw her out of his life. "You just need to go outside for a walk, George," she suggested. "I'll stay here and put up these shelves, and when you've calmed down enough, you can come back and we'll talk, okay?"

But George just stood there glaring at her, his eyes sending darts of anger.

"May I just ask one thing of you?" Andie said coldly.

"What is it?"

"Would you please go upstairs and get those things that Baby World delivered? They're scattered all over my apartment."

This news made George's face light up. "It arrived? The new furniture? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, it's all there," she said.

George ran out and up the stairs, letting the door shut behind him. She listened speculatively as he reached the upper landing and tried her door. It was locked. A slow smirk crossed her face as George ran back down the stairs and rapped lightly on his own door. "Hey, Andie," he whispered loudly. "I'll need the keys to your apartment. Your door is locked."

"I know that, George," Andie whispered back. "I'll see you later. Your nice long walk starts right now."

"You tricked me!" he shouted.

"You tricked yourself. Now get going, and don't come back until you've turned back into a rational human being."

Something resembling a growl emanated from the other side of the door, and then Andie listened in satisfaction as his footsteps vanished down the stairs.

It was a good hour before he returned.

"Who's there?" Andie called with a straight face when he knocked on the door.

"Who do you think?"

"Are you sufficiently calmed down?"

"Most efficiently," he answered.

"That will suffice." She opened the door, but the angry scowl was still there. "You still look upset."

"Out," he said as he plowed through the door. "Right now."

Andie was dumbfounded. "You—you lied! You're not calmed down at all."

"All's fair in love and war," he stated. "And this is definitely war." His eyes fell on the shelves that she had put up, and he smiled in spite of himself. "Hey, look at that," he said. He went over and examined her handiwork. He was impressed, no doubt about it. Picking up a ruler, he made exact measurements. "Perfect," he pronounced turning towards her. The look that passed between them reminded her irrationally of the one they had exchanged the very first day they had met, standing downstairs on the front stoop. It was a look of inevitability, of recognition. Her smile was radiant as she accepted the obvious.

George looked like a little boy caught in his own trap. He looked up, looked down, and finally ambled over to her, standing so close to her that her blood jumped.

"Do you have any idea the trouble you've cost me?"

"I was thinking of you as well as Speedy when I called Social Services," she said, glad for the chance to set the record straight. To soften what she had to say next, she took his hand in hers. "I was convinced you were hiding your head in the sand, George. You were dashing around like a circus performer, trying to juggle and balance your act. Speedy doesn't need an act. He needs stability."

George looked down and said nothing for a long moment. But his hand remained locked in hers, and when he spoke, his voice was intently earnest. "I don't think you know how much Speedy means to me, Andie. I feel an attachment to him that transcends a lot of other things."

Comprehension dawned on her face. "Are you telling me . . . you want to keep Speedy—permanently?"

"Of course," he said with a trace of his old impatience. "What do you think this is all about?"

"But you never said—I thought you just wanted to take care of him until Mindy can be located."

"Don't be ridiculous. Mindy isn't fit to take care of him. Do you think I'm going to let them hand that child back to *her*?"

"I'm so sorry, George," she whispered, tears springing to her eyes. "I wish you had told me."

"Shhh," he whispered. "It will all work itself out with a little help from us."

She looked up into his eyes. "Us?"

He smiled at her and nodded, and the dam broke. All at once she was lost in his arms, their mouths joining in a thankful rush of relief. George kissed her again and again and again, sealing their truce and stroking her hair with a tenderness that thrilled her.

---

It seemed natural and right for them to spend the night together. The next morning, Andie had to race upstairs to her own apartment to get dressed for work. The subject of George and Speedy was on her mind all day, and she rushed home as soon as she could, anxious to see George.

She found a neatly typed note taped to her door. "They found Mindy," it said. "She's in Los Angeles. I'm flying out there immediately. Love, George."

That was all. There wasn't even a phone number. Dumbstruck, Andie opened her door and reread the note, trying to make sense out of it. Was George going out there to bring Mindy back? Or to drop Speedy off?

The thought of Speedy being left in California enraged her. Speedy belonged here, with George—and, she realized with a sinking heart, with her. The thought of

losing him was suddenly devastating.

By the middle of the following week, she could bear it no more. It was Wednesday evening and she was a total wreck, sitting morosely in front of the television.

The doorbell rang. She turned down the television and threw on a bathrobe.

"Who is it?"

"Me."

Her heart stopped. "George! I don't believe it!"

She opened the door excitedly. There he was, looking so dear and familiar that she wanted to throw herself into his arms and stay there. Speedy was perched in one arm and a dozen roses were balanced in George's other arm.

"Everything is fine now," he announced before she could say a word. "Social Services says Speedy can continue to stay with me."

"What about Mindy? God, George, you could at least have called. When did you get back?"

"This morning. And don't start nagging yet," he said with good humor.

"Here," he added, holding out the roses.

"These are for you."

"Andie!" Speedy cried in his chirpy little voice.

"I missed you, sweetie," she whispered, kissing his rosy face. "How've you been?"

"He's been fine," George answered, "and so have I."

"Come on downstairs with me." He turned and walked to the door, but Andie hesitated. "Come on, I won't bite."

"Let me just get dressed," she relented. George took Speedy into the hall, and she climbed quickly into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

When she was ready, he led her down the stairs with a definite air of secrecy. Her curiosity rose as she followed him, stopping on the landing as he got out his keys.

"Cast your eyes on this," George an-

nounced grandly. His door opened slowly to reveal an astonishing sight.

The entire apartment had been transformed.

Andie was stunned. The couch and chairs were gone, replaced by a studio bed and the dresser from the bedroom. The windows were all barred, the dumbwaiter shaft had been sealed up, and the coffee table now had rubber bumper guards around the corners. A wooden gate was locked across the entrance to the kitchen, and another gate was stretched across the entrance to the bedroom. What had once been the dazzling showplace of a bachelor was now a homey nest for a rambunctious two-year-old and one deeply caring adult.

Andie blinked in awe. "I don't believe it," she said. "When did you have time to do all this?"

"We started it before I left. The rest was done today. Do you like it?"

"It's quite efficient," was all she could say.

"So you approve?"

"Obviously Social Services did. I guess Morty gave you a clean bill of approval."

"I passed with flying colors." George beamed.

"Did you locate Mindy?"

"Yes," George said tersely. "She's shackled up with a guy she met on the beach. She agreed that she's too young and unstable to take care of Speedy, and she's perfectly willing for him to stay with me until a final decision is made. Morty said he doesn't think there will be any obstacles to our adopting Speedy legally."

"That's terrific, George!" Andie grabbed his arm joyfully, then realized what he'd just said. "Our?"

"Andie Maguire, will you marry me?"

Embarrassed by his mock proposal, she looked around. "Oh, really, George. Stop it."

He looked injured. "I'm perfectly serious, Andie. I am asking you to marry



me."

She glared at him sternly. "Are you really serious? Do you really mean this?"

"Yes." The one word was just as lucid, his eyes meeting hers frankly, without a quiver.

Andie's head began to spin and her heart lifted. "Yes!" she cried, laughing with delight.

Suddenly, she felt a small hand tugging at her dress. Looking down into Speedy's earnest round gage, she smiled through

her tears. "What is it, honey?"

"I hungwy!" Speedy informed them. "I want chocvit!"

George reached promptly into his pocket and produced a miniature bite-size Hershey bar. "Here you go," he said. "And since, we're all going to be family now, I think you should give Andie a bite, too."

Speedy considered this order for a moment, then held out his chocolate bar and Andie smiled and took a bite. ♥

# ***DID YOU MISS ANY BACK ISSUES?***

Simply check the issues you wish to order in the coupon below. Enclose \$2.00 for each issue then add 50¢ to the total to cover postage and handling.

**Every issue contains 5 romances** filled with love, romance excitement and great reading pleasure. Be sure you own every back issue to make your collection complete.

**DIGEST PUBLISHING, INC., 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024.**

Please send me the following back issues: (check issues desired)

## **5 GREAT ROMANCES**

- ☐ AUG 83
- ☐ SEP 83
- ☐ JAN-FEB 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 84
- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ JUL-AUG 84
- ☐ SEP-OCT 84
- ☐ NOV-DEC 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 85
- ☐ MAY-JUN 85
- ☐ JUL-AUG 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ NOV-DEC 85
- ☐ JAN-FEB 86
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ MAY-JUN 86
- ☐ JUL-AUG 86
- ☐ JAN-FEB 87

## **WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORIES**

- ☐ SEP 83
- ☐ NOV-DEC 83
- ☐ JAN-FEB 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 84
- ☐ MAY-JUN 84
- ☐ SEP-OCT 84
- ☐ NOV-DEC 84
- ☐ MAR-APR 85
- ☐ MAY-JUN 85
- ☐ JUL-AUG 85
- ☐ SEP-OCT 85
- ☐ NOV-DEC 85
- ☐ JAN-FEB 86
- ☐ MAR-APR 86
- ☐ MAY-JUN 86
- ☐ SEP-OCT 86
- ☐ NOV-DEC 86
- ☐ JAN-FEB 87

## **LOVE TREASURES**

- ☐ VOL. I-No. 2
- ☐ VOL. I-No. 3
- ☐ VOL. I-No. 4
- ☐ VOL. I-No. 5

**LIMITED  
OFFER!**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_



# *Tailor-Made*

---

*Chris Burns had no regrets over leaving the Big City, until her refuge was invaded by actor Daniel Collins. She knew she loved him—but could she bear to return to her old life, even if it included Daniel's love?*

---

—ELIZABETH BARRETT—

---

With a tired sigh Christine Burns propped her elbow on the windowsill and stared out at the sundrenched river below. The surface of the blue water glittered, sunbeams winking an invitation to Chris to leave her cares behind and come play. Sailboats drifting gracefully upriver to the ocean beyond beckoned her to their decks.

A clatter and a mumbled curse behind her made Chris spin from the window and back

to reality. Linda, one of the waitresses, muttered as she pulled a carton of milk from the refrigerator. Chris glanced at the order slip Linda had written up.

"Warm milk?" she asked, amused.

Linda nodded. "Some tourists have brought their great-aunt with them, and she likes a glass of warm milk with all her meals."

Chris nodded—she had a similar great-aunt—then continued reading the order.

From TAILOR-MADE by Elizabeth Barrett, a Loveswept® Book. Copyright© 1985 by Elizabeth Barrett. Reprinted by permission of Bantam Books. All rights reserved.

The two cups of fish chowder were simple, as was the prosciutto and cheese sandwich. But she groaned at the next order: a tabouli salad. There wasn't enough left for a full serving. This surprisingly warm Memorial Day weekend apparently had convinced the tourists that it was time to begin eating lighter entrees for lunch. In the one week that Chris had been manager of The Cup of Kindness—as she'd newly named the restaurant in deference to her distant ancestor, Robert Burns—she had never seen the salad disappear so quickly.

"We're out of tabouli salad," Chris said a little more loudly than was necessary. "Cyndy spilled the last of the bulgur wheat this morning so I can't make more. You'd better tell the customer there's no more salad and see if she wants something else."

"Okey-dokey," Linda said easily, and swung her voluptuous body out of the kitchen.

Chris smiled. Her own slender, athletic body seemed far more comfortable to live in than Linda's generous, curvy one. Her well-rounded but small breasts rarely needed a bra, and her slim hips had a seductive curve from her narrow waist, although they were scarcely noticeable in the jeans, painter's pants, and chinos she wore. Now, she thought with a grin as she began to spoon hot fish chowder out of the caldron, with a large white apron covering her, she looked like a fifteen-year-old boy at his summer job.

"Chris." Linda's stage whisper was so sharp and sudden that Chris almost poured the chowder onto her hand. "There's a customer at the register."

Chris nodded in response, quickly filled the second bowl, then entered the dining area, wiping her hands on her apron. As she walked to the front of the room where the register was, she noted with relief that the restaurant was almost emp-

ty, except for a few dawdling tourists and one special customer who she'd already served with extra care. In the short time she had been there, moving from New York City to New Hampshire where her sister Toni lived, Chris had been delighted with her new career. Today, however, she thought as she began ringing up the check, would have tried the patience of the Galloping Gourmet.

After thanking the customer for his patronage and inviting him to come back soon, Chris turned back toward the kitchen. She paused for a moment, though, and surveyed the restaurant. On the far side of the room from where she stood, the kitchen took up one corner. Along that outer wall, large bay windows looked out over the Piscataqua River and Kittery, Maine, on the opposite shore. Tables by these windows were the most popular. That end of the room was the brightest, for an interior wall had been put up in the front of the restaurant years ago. This separated it from the pottery/wood-carving store that opened onto the street. Both the store and the restaurant had been owned and run by Mr. Carstairs, but he had decided to put all of his efforts into the store, and had offered her manager-ship of the restaurant.

Now she happily noted the heavy wooden tables and the cane-backed chairs, the cutlery and glasses that sparkled and glistened in the sun, the pottery vases that held wildflowers on each table. Linda emerged from the kitchen with the steaming cups of chowder, and Chris sighed, remembering that she still had work to do. She began to walk quickly around the few tables between the register and the kitchen, but a hand on her arm brought her to a halt.

The sudden feel of warm skin against her own startled Chris, and she looked down with wide eyes. In her perusal of her domain she had missed a lone customer

sitting away from the door toward the side of the room in the dim light. Cut off from the bright sun here, Chris could tell that the customer was a man with pleasant features, but no more.

"Would it be too much trouble for someone to bring me a menu?" the man asked softly, not bothering to remove his hand. "That is, if you're done daydreaming. . . and this place really is The Cup of Kindness."

She jerked her arm away. Fitting way to end the day, she thought.

"I'm very sorry, sir," she replied. "I'll bring you a menu right away." And she did, but when she'd handed him the sheet of paper and turned to go, his hand stopped her again.

"You might as well take my order," he said. "I'm in a hurry and I've waited here long enough."

Caught, Chris wondered if anything had been left on the stove. She had made the ham and cheese sandwich, dished out the chowder, Linda hadn't yet taken the order from the other—the milk!

"Yikes," Chris shrieked, and dashed into the kitchen just in time to watch the milk in the small saucepan begin to boil over the sides. Grabbing a pot holder, she lifted the pan from the fire and dropped it into the sink as quietly as she could. She heard footsteps behind her. She pivoted, fully intending to say something to Linda about not watching the milk. However, her intention died when she saw that it wasn't Linda who stood there.

Instead, it was a man—a tall, well-built man dressed casually in jeans and a white cotton shirt. His hair was blond and thick, falling over his forehead and the back of his collar. His eyes were a deep brown—and twinkling in a most beguiling way. She realized suddenly that this was the customer she had just rudely run away from, and she groaned inwardly.

"Hey, is this any way to run a

restaurant and treat your customers?" he asked in a majestically deep and rich baritone.

"I'm sorry you've been inconvenienced," she said tartly.

"Seems to me this is a rather haphazard way to conduct a business," he drawled. "If I were you, I'd give the manager some suggestions."

The "manager" moved away from the sink with a sudden burst of energy. "Let me tell you something, Mister. This restaurant works just fine. . . usually. It's when people in a rush like you come in at the tail end of a mealtime that we have problems. Now, please go."

Oh, Lord, Chris thought. Why had she said that? She had always been so good at using humor to lighten a situation like this. Why should she be so sharp with this man?

But the man merely folded his arms and leaned back against the stove. "The name's Daniel, not Mister."

Daniel," she requested wearily, "would you please move away from the stove? I have to make some tea and more milk."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

Her back straightened. "It's not for me," she said, her lips finally curving in a grin. "Now, move!"

"That's more like it," he responded lightly, and went over to the window.

"It's like a three-ring circus in here," she muttered as she put on some water to heat.

"Did you put in enough for me?"

Chris clutched the edge of the stove. At that moment a tugboat on the river below gave a blast of its horn, a raucous, bleating sound. It was the perfect response, and Chris laughed aloud at the timing. She turned to the attractive man at her left.

"You are my nemesis for the day," she said seriously, "and it's probably thanks

to you that a hundred and one things have been going wrong. But I would like the day to end on a good note, and since I have a very important customer in there munching on a ratatouille sandwich, I'd just as soon you take yourself and my bad luck out of here." There, she thought. That was done rather nicely.

"Who's out there? The mayor?" Apparently he was going to ignore her blatant dismissal—again.

"Director of Summer Activities at Prescott Park," Chris answered as she spooned tea leaves into a pot. She assembled the tea things on a tray, poured boiling water into the pot, and fixed another glass of warm milk, then walked to the kitchen door with the tray. She sent Daniel a significant glance before entering the dining room.

The Director of Summer Activities at Prescott Park, an attractive but rather staid lawyer named Larry, informed Chris that the sandwich was delightful. She sighed with relief. This man could do a great deal for the restaurant's reputation with tourists. He invited her to join him as he finished eating, and she gratefully sank into a chair.

"Who's that?" Larry asked suddenly.

She turned quickly and watched Daniel's tall form stride out the door.

"No one," she responded, attempting to quell the small feeling of regret that was quickly rising in her. "Just another customer."



The little theater was filled with the low hum of several dozen people carrying on conversations. Many people stood on the stage conferring with one another, while the rest occupied seats and aisles, exchanging gossip. Chris had heard the chattering sound even as she dashed in the front door of the theater. Larry had stayed longer than she had expected, and she had been late getting out of the

restaurant. She had gone home to shower and change anyway. Although the meeting was casual, she felt the occasion warranted a clean pair of jeans and a fresh shirt.

After entering the auditorium through a door high above the stage, she scanned the scene and people below her for one face in particular. She found it on the stage, and made her way through the people still standing in the aisle, greeting those she knew as she went along. When she got there, she leaped lightly onto the stage and tapped a slight, dark-haired woman on the shoulder. The woman turned instantly and let out a welcoming cry.

"Chris! You came!" The woman enveloped Chris in a hug, and Chris chuckled as she threw her own arms around the other woman.

"Now, Toni," she scolded gently, "would I have let down my own sister—and the leading lady besides?"

Toni pushed Chris away and adopted a severe expression on her beautiful face. "If you didn't want to come, you wouldn't have," she retorted.

Chris smiled fondly at her older sister, but before she could reply Toni was being pulled away by the assistant director.

Chris looked around the theater, picking out the faces of the members of the company—actors and technical workers—and the volunteers like herself. Most of the actors, some of the "techies," and a few locals she recognized. They were younger people, and had about them the glow that Chris was so familiar with. It was the glow one felt before the start of a new show, when everyone was filled with expectation and problems were far in the future. Chris sighed, easily thinking of a half dozen disasters that would occur in the costume shop in the first week. It had taken days of coaxing and arguing for Toni to persuade Chris to agree even to

consider coming this evening and she hadn't completely made up her mind until a few hours earlier.

"Hey." An elbow nudged Chris. "Why so glum?"

"Hello, Ginnie," Chris greeted the costume designer, a large woman—straight off a New England farm—who'd come up to stand beside her. "You ready for all this?" she asked, gesturing at the volunteers.

"Oh, sure," Ginnie responded enthusiastically. "I love the summer season. Days are longer, so I can get more work out of the non-union people." She chortled and Chris shook her head with mock severity.

"Taking advantage of—"

But Ginnie interrupted her, grabbing Chris's arm. "You *are* going to be my assistant designer, aren't you? I need you, Chris. And you'll get paid."

Chris stared thoughtfully off at a far corner of the theater, remembering. There had been so many shows in New York, both musicals and dramas. Did she really want to do another one? Even on a part-time basis, costuming this production would eat up the scant, precious time she had for herself, for her new home.

The grip on her arm tightened. "And if that's not enough to convince you," the older woman whispered urgently, "how about if I promise you can work on the leading man, Daniel Collins? He's up from New York for the summer season."

Chris followed the inclination of Ginnie's head to where a man had walked on to the opposite side of the stage. His head was turned away, but there was no mistaking that blond hair. It was Daniel. Chris shook off Ginnie's hand, then turned to her.

"He's an actor? Your leading man?" she managed to get out. Ginnie's nod answered her question. "Why then," Chris continued in her best imitation of

Scarlett O'Hara, "I'd be simply overjoyed to make designs on—that is, for—that wonderful man. Just tell me what I can do, Virginia, honey." She patted Ginnie on the cheek, then hurried off the stage to an inconspicuous seat in the midst of a crowd of people.

She focused her attention on the stage, where the artistic director of Theater-by-the-Sea was talking about the show, *Kiss Me Kate*. She had worked on this show a few years before, and had seen it performed by other companies a half dozen times, but each director handled each production differently, and she wanted to hear his approach.

After the director finished explaining his artistic approach to *Kiss Me Kate*, the technical director explained the nuts-and-bolts approach, especially the challenges of working with the outdoor stage at Prescott Park. Then the heads of the different technical areas—introduced themselves and announced when their respective first meetings were going to be. The director rose again for the closing statement.

"As you all know, auditions are over, and the cast has been selected. It wasn't easy, choosing among all those talented people"—why, Chris wondered, did they give the same speech every time?—"but I feel we've got a wonderful cast and we're going to have a spectacular show." He moved to sit down as people enthusiastically applauded, then remembered something else. "Of course, we'd be nowhere without our technical crews, so thanks to all of you for lending a helping hand." He sat down, and Chris repressed the urge to boo and hiss. She glanced at Ginnie, whose expression seemed to be saying. They never change. Techies are always the low people on the totem pole. Chris sighed in agreement.

Everyone was now milling about in a sociable way, and Chris decided to say

good-bye to Toni before she left. She began working her way to the stage. When she finally reached it, looking up from the pit, she couldn't see Toni.

"Oh, heck," she muttered, and easily vaulted onto the stage.

"Looking for someone?" a voice somewhere to her right asked. Her breath caught in her lungs, and she turned slowly to meet Daniel's intense brown eyes.

"As a matter of fact, I was," she answered, "and it wasn't you."

Daniel dramatically swooped a hand down upon his heart. "Cut to the quick. Ah, green-eyed maiden, how can you be so cruel?" Several people heard his melodramatic tones and turned to look at the pair with interest.

Embarrassed, Chris snapped, "They're not green, they're hazel." She started to leave, not comfortable as the center of attention, but a hand gripped her wrist. "Is grabbing an arm the only way you know to get a woman's attention?" she asked, remembering the incident in her restaurant. The memory brought an even greater rush of emotion, but she didn't bother to examine the cause of those strong feelings.

Daniel seemed unabashed by her reprimand, and smiled charmingly. "Not everyone's attention. Only yours," he said gallantly, then continued before she could bite out another caustic remark. "I just wanted to ask if you're thinking of breaking into the big time?"

"The big time?" she echoed blankly.

"This"—he gestured with his free arm—"the theater. The smell of the greasepaint, et cetera, et cetera."

"The theater?" Chris wasn't sure if she should be annoyed or amused.

"Ah." Daniel turned his mesmerizing eyes back to her face. "I've found you out, have I?" His hand easily slipped from around her wrist until he was lightly holding her hand. "Well, don't worry. I

won't tell your folks, and, who knows, I may even help you."

"Now, hold on—"

"Your folks don't approve of New York, I bet," he went on, seemingly oblivious to her words. "Nor of New York actors. Well, I promise I'm relatively harmless." He paused as though waiting for confirmation or denial from Chris, but when she was silent, he went on. "What part of the theater are you interested in?"

"Costumes," she answered promptly. A wicked little devil within was urging her not to correct Daniel's misconception about her just yet.

"Great! That means we'll see each other often when I come in for fittings." He shifted closer to her, tightening his grip on her hand. "Why don't you see if you can work on my costumes," he suggested in a seductive voice. "There's nothing like a fitting to bring two people close." His warm breath was fanning her face, softly stirring wisps of hair about her temples.

She pulled back slightly, hoping that if she put some distance between them, her breathing would slow to normal and her face wouldn't feel so flushed. But her movement only caused more trouble, for her eyes met his, and she almost gasped aloud at the desire she read in those chocolate-brown depths.

"Really, sir," she managed to reply, shifting her eyes, her voice a little shaky, "I'm sure that a lowly crew member like me wouldn't be allowed to come near the costumes for the leading man." There was a slight touch of sarcasm in her tone as she finished. The chance to tease this presumptuous man had restored her equilibrium, and she now calmly met his gaze.

He smiled tenderly and lifted her hand close to his sensuous lips. "Oh, come now. I'm sure these delightful hands are



as talented in the sewing room as in the . . . kitchen."

"Well, I don't know about that," Chris responded lightly, ignoring the jumpy feeling in her stomach. Most of my early sewing experience came from sewing buttons on my father's and brother's shirts"—absolutely true fifteen years ago—"and hemming my jeans and stuff." She was pleased to note that Daniel's eyes had hardened a little, as though he weren't sure if she was being honest. "So," she continued, a down-east twang becoming more noticeable as she went along, "it doesn't seem to me like you'd be wantin' me to work on your outfits." Turning the tables on him, she now moved closer to Daniel. "Though I suppose I could sew on some of *your* buttons." Her free hand lightly fingered the buttons on his shirt, and she was delighted when his frame trembled slightly. "Or put the hem in your pants." Her hand dropped to brush his firm thigh. "I'm sure I'd have no trouble measuring you." His eyes widened and his lips parted slightly, and Chris knew he wasn't believing what he was hearing. "Measuring you for a hem, that is," she finished with a slight chuckle. She took a step back and cocked her head as she returned Daniel's stare.

For a moment silence stretched between them, then Daniel blinked and laughed. "You don't belong in the costume shop, young lady; you should be on stage."

Chris stiffened slightly at his words. Young lady, indeed. She was twenty-six, even if she often looked ten years younger than that. "No thanks," she said haughtily. "The stage is much too dull. Everybody who's anybody ends up in the costume shop sooner or later."

"But you're not out front," Daniel countered, his voice dropping to a seductive level. "You'll never be able to stand before an audience and have them ap-

plaud your efforts."

"Not all of us need that kind of approval," Chris replied, her jaw tightening. Daniel was starting to tread on thin ice here. One of the reasons that prompted her to leave the theater in New York was the lofty attitude that actors lorded over the technical workers. "Technies—foolishly—rely on the cast for approval," she added heatedly.

He stared at her, bemused. "Don't make *me* sound like some insensitive clod. As an actor, I'm well aware of how much techies add to a show." Chris choked at his patronizing words, but he forestalled her comment. "I always have a good relationship with the techies I have to work with. Why"—his lips twitched with humor—"to quote a popular saying, some of my best friends are techies." His eyes had softened, as though he had just offered Chris the simple solution to all her problems.

But she was too angry to pay much attention to the beguiling look on Daniel's handsome face. She pulled away from him, her eyes blazing a vivid green now. "It never fails." Her soft voice was filled with scorn. "Scratch an actor and you'll find an egocentric. Let me give you fair warning, Mr. New York Actor. I'm *designing* your costumes, just like the costumes I've designed for Broadway shows for the last four years, and you better hope I fall into your "best friend" category." Without another word she turned away and stalked off the stage.

---

The next week went by in a flash. Business at the restaurant boomed, and Chris began to make some of the changes she'd planned. Not only did she begin serving Sunday brunch, featuring a special dish and classical music, but she also opened the restaurant for dinner one evening each week. She planned to invite a local artist to each dinner, to show his

paintings, read poetry, or play music.

She filled in her "spare moments" with work at the costume shop, managing to keep her contact with Daniel minimal. Even so, their brief encounters managed to disconcert her, and there was rarely a moment when he wasn't on her mind. But it was clear from Daniel's manner that he had not believed her assertion that she was a designer. He still treated her as if she were a volunteer or an underling.

On Friday evening, Chris was at work in the theater, finishing Daniel's costumes. She had worked hard at designing them, spent hours selecting the material, and meticulously drafted the patterns. The actual construction of the costumes had been done by the crew. Looking over the completed outfits now, she had an anxiety attack.

What if she had been using the wrong measurements? What if these colors made him look putrid rather than dashing? What if—

"Chris! What are you doing here so early?" Ginnie's loud voice broke through Chris's worrying.

"Daniel Collins is coming in for a fitting tonight," she explained, gesturing to the costumes she had been examining.

"No wonder you were pushing the crew so hard these past three days. Why didn't you just say they needed to be done by Wednesday for a fitting?"

Chris shot Ginnie an exasperated look. "Are you kidding? We'd have more 'help' tonight than we could handle if they knew the one and only Daniel Collins was being fitted." She began pinning trim on one of the Elizabethan costumes. "He's due at seven."

Ginnie nodded as she moved about the costume shop, examining work in progress, tossing out scraps of material that had been left lying about, plugging in the irons. The costume shop was a long rectangular room in the basement of the

theater, adjacent to the makeup room. It was cluttered with cutting tables, sewing machines, racks of clothes, mannequins, bolts of material, and boxes filled with costume jewelry. Looking up from her work, Chris gazed about the room. How many years of her life had she spent beneath a stage? She didn't regret her choice of occupation, only that the theatrical world had not treated her as she had wanted to be treated.

"With respect."

"What was that?" Ginnie asked.

Chris jumped, unaware that she had spoken aloud. She went on to explain, eager for someone to understand. "Do you know why I left this, Ginnie?"

"Not really," she responded laconically, heaving herself onto a high stool beside one of the construction tables and riffling through her designs there.

"It didn't treat me right." Chris put down her work and began pacing the cement floor. "No matter how good I got, I could never be on an equal footing with the actors. I could have become the best costume designer in the United States, and no one would know my name."

"I didn't think you were interested in fame," Ginnie observed.

Chris shook her head. "I didn't want people chasing me down the street, begging for my autograph. But I did want recognition." Her pacing quickened. "I wanted the women in their afternoon theater clubs to read their programs and say, 'Look, Shirley, Christine Burns did the costumes for this one. This should be a delight.'"

"How do you know they didn't?" Ginnie finished rearranging her designs, slid off the stool, and walked over to the coffee-maker. "Want some?" she asked over her shoulder.

Chris nodded. "Come on, Ginnie. You know as well as I do that people name-drop actors, directors, producers, and the

occasional set designer. Never costume designers. At least not outside the theater." Her pacing had brought her back to the work table and she halted, facing the door, her back to Ginnie.

"So," Ginnie said loudly as she filled the coffeepot with water, "you were well known and respected by your peers. That's more than a lot of good people can claim."

"Respected by a bunch of egocentric actors?" Chris exploded, slamming a hand down on the wooden table. The resulting crash was quite satisfying.

Before Chris was even aware of the sting on her palm, she saw a form move into the doorway. Daniel strode into the costume shop. She hurriedly picked up the tunic she had been working on earlier.

"Hiya, Ginnie!" he called cheerfully. "Got enough coffee there for me too?"

"For you, Danny, anytime," Ginnie answered with a quick laugh.

Daniel chuckled as he came around the edge of the work table and stood beside Chris. She shifted nervously at having him stand so close, but continued to pin the trim on the costume.

Chris almost sighed with relief when Daniel turned away to accept the mug of coffee Ginnie had brought to him. Ginnie also set down another mug beside Chris, which she automatically pushed far away from the costume.

"Here." Chris shoved the tunic and a pair of trousers at him. "Go try this on." She followed with a vague gesture to the partition behind which actors could change, then hurriedly picked up her mug of coffee. She burned her tongue on the hot coffee.

"Damn!" she said, then opened her mouth and began fanning it with her hand in an attempt to cool her tongue.

Ginnie chuckled. "My, my. I've never seen you so flustered, Christine. Almost as though—"

"Vir-gin-ee-aaa!" a musical voice called from the hall.

Chris looked at Ginnie with a puzzled expression. "I didn't know you'd asked Toni in for a fitting."

"It's a lucky coincidence. Now we can see how their costumes look together." She turned to the door. "In he-er!" she answered Toni in a singsong falsetto.

"Is this the audition for the chorus?" Daniel's amused voice remarked.

Chris swung around on her stool to look at the man. She drew in a sharp breath when she saw him, telling herself it was only because of her burned tongue. But that wasn't it at all. The tunic Daniel was wearing was forest green, and his calf-length trousers were the same chocolate-brown color as his eyes. The tunic laced at the top, but Daniel had left it open, exposing a large area of his chest.

"*Mon Die*, Chrissie, you done outdid yourself again." Toni had silently entered the room and now stood beside her sister's stool. "Very, very nice," she added, nodding. Daniel flashed Toni a gracious smile.

Toni's presence, and Daniel's smile to her, galvanized Chris into action. She slid off the stool, draping a tape measure about her neck and picking up a box of pins before she touched the floor. Daniel was still smiling when she reached him, but the look of total concentration on her face caused the smile to fade. Good, she thought as she noted this. She didn't mind workers having a good time in the costume shop, but she personally could never joke about a fitting.

She looked at him seriously. "Lift your arms," she commanded. "Drop them and shrug your shoulders." He did. "Hands on your waist and take a deep breath." He did. "Stand in character." He did by throwing his shoulders and head back, spreading his legs wide, and balling his hands on his hips.

The tunic did fit him well, with only a few minor problems that would need to be fixed. Chris quickly pinned and marked these spots. She repeated her posing instructions to Daniel, making certain he could move about without straining the material.

Nodding with satisfaction finally, she asked, "Is there anything that doesn't feel right?"

Daniel gestured to his waist. "The pants are a little too big."

She looked down with a frown. Since they didn't have boots for him yet, his trousers looked a little odd ending so abruptly in the middle of his calf. On the other hand, they fit his well-shaped, muscular legs perfectly, and Chris realized she had been staring at those legs a little too long. Without looking up she walked around Daniel, and pinned the back of his trousers at the waist.

Daniel turned to face her and she nodded in approval. "Now you're perfect," she said. She didn't give Daniel the chance to respond, though, but moved back to the table and picked up another costume. She wordlessly handed it to him, and he walked away to change.

Chris climbed onto her stool, picked up her mug of now cool coffee, and began sipping it, allowing her thoughts to wander some. At least her brief conversation with Ginnie earlier had further clarified in Chris's mind why she was pinning so much hope on Daniel's reaction to her costumes. It all came back to respect. From thinking she was an inept waitress in the restaurant, to assuming she was a starry-eyed volunteer for summer theater, Daniel had totally disregarded her as a professional woman. Hopefully tonight he would recognize, and respect, her talents as a costume designer. When that was settled—

"Something wrong?" Daniel whispered into her ear.

Chris jumped. "Why must you sneak up on me like that!" she wailed as Daniel laughed. She peered closely at him as she picked up her pins again. He seemed much more relaxed, as though he might have finally put confidence in her abilities to at least fit a costume.

By the time all of Daniel's costumes had been fitted, the costume shop was almost crowded with workers, other actors being fitted, and the occasional performer or techie who had dropped in for a visit. Chris was hanging up Daniel's costumes on a rack when he joined her, dressed again in his street clothes. Reaching one long arm around her, he fingered the green tunic he had worn first.

"The costumes are . . . very good," he said hesitantly.

This is it, Chris thought. A truce or an unbridgeable breach. She nodded, not sure her voice would be steady if she spoke.

"They, uh, reflect the character very well," he continued.

"They're supposed to," she managed to respond lamely. She straightened a few more costumes on the rack just for an excuse not to face him.

Daniel had other ideas, though, for he gently grasped her shoulders and urged her to turn. Taking a deep breath and gathering all her strength, Chris raised her face to his, hoping that her eyes would not reveal the heat that shot through her whenever Daniel touched her. His own eyes were soft and beckoning, and if his hands hadn't still been on her shoulders, she feared she would have happily nestled against his lean body and let this all-important conversation die.

His flingers tightened slightly, as if he had read her thoughts and was not about to stop now. Focusing directly on her eyes, he asked hoarsely, "Who made my costumes?"

Chris jerked her head toward the work

table. "They did."

The fingers tightened again, as did Daniel's jaw. "That's not what I meant, Christine. Who *designed* my costumes?"

"Why does it matter?" Now what impossible imp had made her ask that?

Daniel drew in a deep breath, flaring his nostrils. "If you did do these costumes, Chris, as I strongly suspect is the case, it means I've grossly misjudged you. I'll have made a complete fool of myself, and I will do anything to make you forgive me for not believing you."

His eyes were burning into hers, and every instinct in her body was telling her to run away, that this actor was getting too serious. No, she told herself firmly. She had run away from New York. If New York had followed her here, she couldn't run away again. This was her home.

She laughed, a lighthearted, joyous sound, all the earlier tension of the evening gone. "Oh, you silly," she chided him, patting his cheek. "Of course I designed them. You think I was going to lose out on the opportunity to, ah, fit a marvelous body like yours?" Her eyes slowly traveled down Daniel's length, and she saw him stiffen at her words.

Once again the fingers tightened, and Chris willingly lifted her eyes to his lean, attractive face. "You little—" he began in a harsh whisper, but broke off. "What do I have to do to make it up to you, Chris?"

Easily slipping from his grasp, she stepped around him and out of reach, then turned back to him. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

---

Linda waved good-bye as she closed the restaurant door behind her. Chris took a final swipe at a table with a rag, then collapsed in a cane-back chair. "If I'd known it was going to be this hard," she commented to the empty room, "I'd have taken a job as a short-order cook at the local fried-clams-and-steamed-hot-dogs

shack."

Resting her chin on her palm, Chris stared out the window. She watched some sailors leave their berths to watch the reflection of the sunset on the ocean, thinking that she wouldn't object to an offer to join them.

Suddenly annoyed with the melancholy that filled her, Chris straightened her slumping shoulders. This wasn't like her at all.

"C'mon, girl," she said aloud, rising from the chair. "You're just a little tired."

*And a little lonesome,* a voice from nowhere added.

"Hush," Chris replied. "I know people here. I just haven't been here that long." She strode purposefully into the kitchen and pulled her canvas bag off a kitchen shelf.

She extracted a hairbrush from the depths of the large bag, then quickly took the pins out of her hair. She fluffed the mass as it tumbled below her shoulders, then brushed it out. She knew without a mirror how it looked—the wispy bangs on her forehead, the slightly wavy locks that fell to just below her shoulders. Not magnificent hair, she admitted, giving it a final stroke, but its pale wheat color made up for that.

She dropped the brush back into the bag, then untied her apron. As she hung the apron on its hook, she glanced down at the ruffled sundress she was wearing.

Usually she wore pants to work, since her apron covered her clothes completely. But today she had gone to the back of her closet and pulled this dress out. It was a dress she had designed herself, with a ruffled neckline and thin shoulder straps.

Now the dress's bright colors and sassy ruffles were cheerful, and she was glad she'd worn the dress rather than her usual outfit.

Feeling better already, she slung her

bag over her shoulder and walked jauntily to the door of the restaurant. One final sweeping glance assured her all was well, and she locked the door behind her. A quick wave to Mr. Carstairs, still in the pottery shop, then donning a pair of large sunglasses, Chris stepped out into the sunny late afternoon.

Some tourists remained in the streets, doing last-minute shopping or sightseeing before dinner. Chris looked down Bow Street for a moment, considering going directly home. Toni had found a place for her to live before Chris had even arrived in Portsmouth, and, as usual, Toni's choice was perfect. The four-room apartment was actually the top floor of a family home on one of the town's main streets. It had an outside door and steps, so Chris didn't have to go through the main part of the house. Although she hadn't had time yet to do much decorating, she loved her new, airy, spacious home, and never minded spending her evenings there alone.

But today she decided to walk to the park first and get her fill of the river and the magnificent flowers that grew in the garden there. Even as she turned the other way, her eyes halted at the old sports car parked by the curb, and the man leaning nonchalantly against it.

Chris was aware that her mouth had dropped open a little at the sight of Daniel and his easy smile. As he pushed himself away from the car, her fingers tightened convulsively on the strap of her bag.

"So that's what's took so long," he greeted her, surveying her from head to foot with a practiced eye. "I approve. You look wonderful."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why waiting for you to take you for a drive, sweetie. This is the first step in my apology."

Chris looked up into Daniel's grin, then answered it with one of her own. "Where

did you want to go for this drive?" she asked, her voice surprisingly husky.

"Up toward Contoocook," he told her happily, guiding her into the low sports car. She had a few remaining qualms, like what's a Contoocook, but she quelled them quickly. How could she be nervous around someone who grinned like the little boy who got the last piece of candy?



After about an hour of driving, Daniel remarked they were nearing their destination. Although long, the drive had been quite pretty, and Chris had been surprised at how relaxed she had felt with Daniel. They had chatted easily about New Hampshire, Portsmouth, her restaurant, and even some about the musical. Daniel knew the area around Portsmouth quite well, much to Chris's amazement. She had assumed, as she often did with actors, that he had sprung, fully grown, into New York and was rarely outside of it.

Now the car began climbing a hill, bringing Chris back to the present. She had forgotten that once away from the coastline and heading toward the White Mountains, the landscape of New Hampshire changed drastically. As the car reached the top of the hill, Daniel pointed out his window, and she gasped with surprise and awe at the sight. In the distance, plainly visible in the clear evening sky, were rows of mountains shaded in soft blues and lavenders, some closer and some farther away, but all gently sloping into one another.

Daniel suddenly turned left onto a narrow, pothole-ridden lane.

"Is this a private drive?" she asked, clutching the strap at her right to steady herself as the mountain view now swung around to her side of the car.

"Nope," Daniel answered. "this is Putney Hill Road. You'd think with the amount of money these people put into their homes here, they could at least put a



few dollars into maintaining this road."

Chris chuckled, then glanced up. A few houses were perched on top of the hill. There was a mix of old and new houses, but all of them seemed to have an outstanding view of the valley below and the mountains beyond.

"How about this one?" Daniel said suddenly, and turned the car into the driveway of an old white farmhouse. It was a lovely home in typical New England style, and Chris was surprised that it looked uninhabited.

"They won't mind if we take a look," Daniel said as he got out of his side of the car. "C'mon," he threw over his shoulder, and began walking past the house into the field behind it.

Chris quickly scrambled out of the car to follow him. Daniel was standing still at the edge of the meadow.

"You could look at that view forever," she whispered as she joined him, her eyes taking in the dark green fir trees in the distance, and the beeches, birches, and sugar maples around them. She had noticed there was even an apple orchard behind one of the houses.

"Sure beats the skyline," Daniel agreed.

How odd, she thought. An actor who didn't live and breathe New York City? He turned toward her, and she avoided those compelling eyes. She wasn't in the mood for drowning.

"Want to go for a walk?" he asked.

She nodded her head, afraid that if she spoke, their voices might blend too well together in the soft evening air, and the beauty of it might lead her into his arms. But the quiet calm of the valley was touching her, stilling her unacknowledged fears about the man, the summer-stock actor who now stood beside her. So when she took his hand and began walking with him through the early summer grass and the multitudes of daisies and red clover,

she told herself that it was only the spirit of nature that overwhelmed her, not desire for his touch.

But Daniel didn't seem to mind the hand-holding. He was as affected as she was by the serene valley and the glorious view, she told herself. But their hands did fit together well, as though their palms were busy starting a new form of communication. With each step they took through the tall grass Chris was aware that the beauty of the valley was fading into the background, and that her senses were concentrating on the stride of the long firm legs clad in well-fitting faded jeans, the strong forearm that occasionally brushed against her, the solid shoulder that was just the right height for cradling her head. Her pulse began to beat wildly as her eyes and hand reported the intoxicating sight and feel of this man. She almost gasped when the hand that held hers moved slightly, and her steps faltered when one of Daniel's long fingers began stroking her sensitive palm.

Struggling for calm, her mind searched frantically for something to hold on to. Somehow they had stopped walking, and the grip on her hand had tightened. She knew what was going to happen, and she dropped her eyes, avoiding his. She spotted some pert, sunshiny daisies at her feet, and on sudden inspiration bent to pick them. He couldn't embrace her if she held a bouquet of flowers between them, could he?

"No." He spoke suddenly, pulling her back up and to him. His other hand was on her shoulder, turning her to face him. She barely had time to notice the dark fire beginning to smolder in his eyes before his mouth was on hers.

His kiss was gentle, his lips scarcely grazing hers, as if he wanted to be sure she was still there. At the first touch, though, her arms automatically rose and her hands cupped his shoulders. He was ap-



parently waiting for this touch, for his arms wrapped about her body, pulling her close against him.

The feel of his lean body against hers excited such warmth that she wondered if they had caught the setting sun between them. But all thought was rapidly melting away. A part of her mind still capable of rational thought told her she was making a big mistake. But as one of Daniel's hands tangled its fingers in her silky hair, and the other hand fit itself to the gentle curve of her waist and stroked her tingling body, she knew the consequences were unimportant. As his mouth rose from hers, she tightened her grasp about him.

"I'm not going anywhere," he muttered sweetly, and his lips slowly began tasting with butterfly kisses the sensitive skin of her throat. His whisper touch was incredibly erotic, and Chris gasped with pleasure, pressing her body even tighter to his, desperate to feel all of him against all of her. Her own fingers weaved through his sunwarmed hair, and she was frustrated that their upright positions hindered her from doing anything more. As Daniel's head, led by those enchanting lips, began to dip lower, she opened her mouth to suggest they make themselves more comfortable, but a sudden noise stopped her. A car was coming.

Chris barely had time to realize she and Daniel were about to have company before the car had turned onto Putney Hill Road and was passing them. The driver honked the horn and a few people yelled good-naturedly at them. She hurriedly pushed back from him, causing his arms to drop at his sides. She placed her hands on his biceps, holding him away from her. For a moment she stood silently, her head down, trying to calm her ragged breathing and collect her errant thoughts. Never had a man's touch so rapidly and effortlessly crumbled her defenses and aroused her passion so that

her entire body—her being—craved more and more. Chris's memory of the greatest intimacy she'd known before was pale beside the ardor that his slightest touch inspired.

Finally in control of her mind, if not her body, she raised her head to stare at his face. Did she look the way he did? she wondered, noticing his moist, soft lips, slightly parted, the unfocused, hazy look in his eyes. As her hazel eyes met his brown ones, he seemed to snap back to reality, and he took a step away from her. She began walking back to the car, and after a moment, he followed her. Neither spoke as they climbed into the sports car or as Daniel turned the car around to head back to Portsmouth. Chris idly noticed out her side window that the sun had disappeared behind the mountains and fir trees, and only its reflected rays lingered deceptively in the darkening sky.

After they had driven a few miles, Daniel finally spoke. "Well, where to?"

*Your bed*, she thought instantly, transfixed by his nearness and the sight of his handsome face. But that, she decided hazily, was too forward. Instead, she shrugged and answered, "Anyplace where we can be alone."

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes shifting from hers to her mussed hair, to her mouth. "Alone?" he echoed. "Chris..."

She lightly touched his arm. "Don't talk about it, Daniel."

Neither had very much to say on the long drive back. As they drove slowly up Market Street, Daniel glanced at her. "I've never seen you so quiet," he remarked.

Chris laughed, forcing herself to relax. "I guess I have been uncommonly silent, haven't I? It has nothing to do with the company. I mean, you're not boring me into silence."

"No." He smiled. "I didn't think that

was the problem.” He turned left onto Bow Street, heading for her restaurant.

She looked about in surprise. “Where are we going?”

“Someplace where we can be alone, like the lady ordered,” he answered as he swung the small car in a U-turn, then parallel-parked it a few buildings up from her restaurant. Killing the engine, he turned to her, then gestured upward. “My apartment.”

Her eyes widened as she also glanced upward. All of these buildings along the river housed restaurants and shops on the first floor, then apartments on the upper floors. Large, expensive apartments with lovely views of the river. “How did you ever—”

“I’m subletting from a friend,” Daniel explained before she finished her question. “It’s a great apartment. Want to see it?”

Chris didn’t hesitate, but nodded as she stepped out of the car. Daniel led the way to the door of the building, then up the narrow stairs to the second floor. He unlocked a door and pushed it open, allowing her to enter first.

She headed directly for the large picture window at one end of the room, looking down on the friendly lights at the piers and on the river. “Oh, Daniel,” she sighed, “you’re right. This is simply marvelous.” She turned to him as he switched on a light. “So long as you never get the urge to jump.”

He chuckled. “Haven’t yet,” he assured her as he took off his jacket and tossed it over a chair.

Looking around, Chris quickly took in the rest of the room—its bare wooden floors interspersed occasionally with a colorful braided rug, the simple wooden furniture with cushions in varying shades of blue, the few spectacular paintings on the walls.

“I love it,” she stated unequivocally.

“It’s the same comfortable, homey feel I’d like for my apartment.”

“Did you have a ‘home’ feeling in New York?” Daniel asked, as he went into the kitchen.

“When Toni and I first lived together we did. But once I got my own studio in Chelsea, it just never felt right.” She turned to look about the room again. “This feels right.”

Daniel came back into the room and handed her a glass. He grinned at her, then said, “A married couple lives here.”

Chris almost choked on her wine. “Unfair!” she cried. “You set me up!” She glared at him.

He grinned unrepentantly. “Not at all, Chris. Would you like to dance?”

She glanced around. There was enough room for a slow dance. Daniel didn’t wait for her response but quickly put a record on the stereo. Chris smiled when the soft music began floating from the large speakers and she recognized a favorite artist. Daniel saw the smile and responded with one of his own. That tender smile coupled with the dreamy music and the comfortable room stirred a sense of belonging in Chris. The sensation began in her nervous stomach, traveled to her heart, which had started to pound for no good reason, then caught in her throat so that she found it difficult to breathe.

Then Daniel was crossing the room to her, his magical eyes looking seriously into hers, his hands lightly brushing against hers, but not holding them. She could feel the warmth of his body reaching out to her, and imagined that hers was doing the same, that they were creating an impregnable cocoon of their own warmth that could never be destroyed or cooled. And when his head slowly lowered toward her upturned face and his lips gently rested for a moment on her own, she knew she was right.

For the briefest of instants neither mov-

ed, only the backs of their hands and their mouths touching slightly. The instant was long enough for Chris to admit to herself the reason for her recent behavior. She was falling in love with Daniel. She loved the sweetness of his disposition and the brashness of his behavior. He was not at all the stereo-typed New York actor. And whether or not he'd leave at summer's end didn't matter tonight. Only his exquisite sensuality mattered at this moment.

With the realization of her growing feelings echoing loudly in Chris's mind, she grabbed hold of Daniel's hands and leaned tentatively into their kiss. His response was instantaneous. He entwined his fingers with hers, starting again that special communication their hands seemed to have. His mouth pressed more firmly against hers, but did not ask for further intimacy, nor did he touch her in any other way. A few seconds later he pulled back.

"Chris," he began seriously, releasing her to cup her face with his hands, staring intensely into her eyes as if searching for the answer to a question he couldn't ask. She confidently returned his gaze, allowing him to read in her expressive eyes what she had just discovered. Tomorrow, if she had to, she could deny everything, but tonight they both needed to know.

"Chris," Daniel said again, apparently reading her mind, "this isn't just tonight. Well, maybe it is. We don't know what'll happen tomorrow. But you mean more to me than just a one-night stand. Making love means more to me than just the physical act." His voice had become almost pleading, as though it were essential that she understand. "I'm not asking for a commitment—"

"Yes, you are, Daniel," Chris interrupted, lightly encircling his neck with her arms. She had known, perhaps from the beginning, what Daniel would demand of her. Now he needed to know that she

would be there tomorrow morning. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't think I'd let you go even if you wanted to," he said huskily, and she read his possessiveness as a sure sign of his feelings. She tightened her hold on him and he slipped his arms around her slender waist, urging her body to rest against his. Their lips met in the hesitant kiss of a new understanding; but they quickly parted against each other to allow the kiss to deepen.

His hands stroked her back with swift, sure caresses from her neck to her hips. Her hands reached up, entangling themselves in his soft hair. His lips moved across her cheek, then down her throat as she obligingly tilted her head to the side. As his hands became bolder, lingering with a hot intensity, hinting at other delights, Chris wanted more. Her hands slid down his back to the waistband of his trousers, and she tugged out his shirttail. His skin was warm and smooth and exhilarating to touch, and she heard him groan softly in response to her caresses. His lips stopped their examination of her left ear to travel to her shoulder, where he nudged aside the slim strap. The bodice of the dress slid down a little, offering a tantalizing glimpse of the curve of her breasts.

Daniel let out a tremulous breath and ran a quivering finger along the line of the dress, following the gentle slope of her bosom. Then that finger began urging the edge of the bodice down, sliding both straps off her shoulders. Chris stood without moving, not even certain she was breathing, lost in the incredible sensuality of Daniel's seduction. She finally could wait no longer for him to reach his goal, and eased the straps farther down her arms to pull them off completely. The bodice fell abruptly to the elastic around her waist, revealing her firm breasts, white against the new tan of her chest.

Daniel took a moment to admire her with his eyes, then his hands and lips were introducing themselves more intimately to her body, covering her with caresses and kisses and tiny bites until Chris felt she could no longer stand.

"Daniel," she whispered urgently.

He didn't misunderstand the plea in her voice, and straightened. "Help me," he said, gesturing to his shirt.

"Gladly." She eagerly unbuttoned the shirt, stopping after each button to place a sweet kiss on his warm, smooth skin. When she was done with the shirt, he unabashedly unbuckled his belt, unzipped and unsnapped his trousers, then lithely slid them down his long legs.

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Chris sensuously slithered her dress over her hips and down her own legs, leaving her clad in her lacy bikini panties and her high-heeled sandals. She bent to remove the shoes, but Daniel put out a hand to stop her.

Daniel knelt then, deftly unfastened her shoes, and slipped them off her feet. He remained on his knees, his hands flowing up her legs to her last bit of clothing. His eyes searched her face, as if looking for a hesitation, any lingering doubt. But her body was tingling in anticipation of more intimacy with Daniel, and she smiled at him as her hands stroked and ruffled his soft hair. He slipped the wisp of lace off her, then stood easily, his eyes still locked on her face. Taking a deep breath, she stepped closer and carefully removed his briefs so that they both stood naked. She was entranced by the desire that filled his eyes, unable to move.

Taking her hand, he led her to the bedroom adjacent to the living room. Chris stayed in the doorway, holding herself as still as she could, allowing the ache of anticipation to reach an almost unbearable fury. Her eyes strayed over Daniel's lean body as he flicked on a small

table lamp, then turned down the covers of the large bed. When he straightened and faced her, she believed she could feel the tautness and tension in him, how he was restraining himself. Willingly she joined him by the bed and without hesitation allowed her hands, her lips, her entire body, to show him in their own way how much she needed and loved him. Her body hummed and quivered with that now familiar ache as he drew her onto the bed with him, his own caresses tender and passionate, sensitive and urgent. For what seemed to her an endless time, they explored each other's bodies with a mindless fascination, exclaiming over new discoveries, of ways to please each other, whispering endearments. She felt her body must be glowing from the love he lavished on it, and she flung her arms wide as Daniel's lips traveled down her eager body. That body, she knew, was floating in a warm ocean, where the swells were rocking her with greater and greater force.

She lost all thought. She only felt the need to share herself with him, to take what he was offering, and she began moving in rhythm with him. The pounding of the waves rocking her was growing louder, but Chris knew she was becoming the water itself, a flowing body of need and fulfillment as continual explosions of joy rippled over her. She cried out to Daniel and he answered, gasping her name as his body trembled and his back stiffened.

Chris sighed tremulously and wrapped her arms tightly about Daniel's neck as he dropped his head onto her shoulder. For several minutes they lay still, and she was content to just support his body with hers. But he stirred, then rolled off her.

"I must be crushing you," he murmured:

"Deliciously."

"Sweet as orange crush?"

She laughed up into his twinkling eyes.

Suddenly they both grew solemn.

"Chris," he said huskily, "I don't have words for what we've shared ... Beautiful, transforming, totally new to me."

Her heart seemed to swell to bursting with emotion. "Oh, Daniel," she said on a sob, and pulled him tightly to her.

---

Chris sat on the edge of the bed and sipped a cup of strong coffee while she watched Daniel, sleeping on his side. She thought he looked marvelous asleep, with his tousled hair and light beard and relaxed features, but she knew she was a little prejudiced. After all, she reminded herself, as if she needed reminding, this was the man she had just made love with. And whom she loved.

She had promised Daniel she would still be here this morning. Now she knew she wanted to be with him every morning. That was the commitment she knew Daniel wanted, but wouldn't demand, from her.

The fact that Daniel had not told her he loved her, or had made no hint of any commitment on his end didn't bother her at the moment. If he could make love to her with such tender energy and passionate caring, she knew she was more than a one-night, or even a one-summer, lover. This was Daniel the man, not Daniel the actor sleeping in this bed, and Daniel the man was honorable and honest and lovable and humorous and—

And Daniel the actor would surely need a job for the fall. He would certainly miss the limelight soon. Would she have to go back to New York with him, leave her restaurant?

"Why the sad look, love?"

Chris jumped as Daniel's soft question brought her back to the here-and-now. There was a look of concern in his eyes that made her heart thump.

"Oh, just thinking about things," she

said lightly. "You know, about the restaurant and the show..."

But Daniel saw through her. "Chris," he interrupted, "I meant what I said last night. You're more important to me than just one night."

"I know, Daniel," Chris said—but sheer relief made her heart beat faster. "But you have to understand—I meant it when I left the theater. I love my little restaurant, and this town. And with you going back to New York soon..."

Daniel sat up in bed, pulling the pillows behind his back and the covers over his waist. "Well, Chris, if that's all that's worrying you, I'm not going anywhere."

"What? What does that mean?" Chris stammered out.

"Umm," Daniel cleared his throat nervously. "Well, there's this theater," he began. "This theater I started, actually, with a little help."

"A theater you started?" Chris asked, perplexed. "You mean, in New York?"

"No." Daniel shook his head for emphasis. "Here in New Hampshire. In Exeter, to be exact."

Exeter was a town about half-an-hour's drive away. Chris had been there a few times, but she'd never noticed a new theater. Her question must have shown on her face, for Daniel explained quickly.

"It's connected with the school there. It's a special theater, for children ages six to eighteen. Those kids—mostly from low-income families—would never get the chance to go to the theater, so I decided to bring it to them."

Chris could well imagine how dumbfounded she looked. But her mind was full of questions. "Why would you start a theater in New Hampshire, then work in New York?"

Daniel started, as though this question was not what he had been expecting. He put his hands behind his head and gazed up at the ceiling. "Why did you go to New

York?"

Chris cocked her head, confused. "Where else would one go? New York's the top."

Daniel nodded wordlessly.

"But I hadn't begun a theater someplace else," she persisted.

Daniel glanced at her, one eyebrow arched. "No, but you did have a desire to run a restaurant, didn't you?"

Chris waved a hand negligently. "Very small idea in those days." She paused, squinting her eyes in an effort to understand what Daniel was driving at. "You mean you want to first prove to New York, ergo the world, that you're a great actor, then you'll return to the theater you began?"

Daniel chuckled. "Don't make it sound so bloodthirsty, sweet. I admit that I wanted to prove myself to New York, and that that was one of the main reasons for not staying here." Chris's stomach muscles tightened. "The other reason was money." He sat up, cross-legged, his arms draped loosely over his knees. "The theater is only three years old, and is just now beginning to support itself. The man who helped me start it, Sam, has been using his own money—of which he has some to spare—to keep the theater going. He's also been taking on some duties because we can't afford to hire anyone else."

"Including you?"

Daniel nodded. "I always wanted to be the director, but we had to wait to see if the theater could support itself and me." He paused tantalizingly.

"Well?" Chris prompted him, impatiently bouncing a little on the bed.

Daniel grinned, then reached out to lightly hold her hands. "It can, sweet. The box office did well this winter and the theater got a grant. Sam's offered me a job I think I've had enough of New York." As he spoke, Daniel was slowly

leaning closer to Chris, and she did not pull away. On his last word their mouth met in a light kiss, but Chris wasn't through with her questions yet.

"Why Exeter?"

Chris was surprised at the almost sheepish expression on his face. "I went to school there."

"You went to school in Exeter?" she repeated, her voice rising. "You mean you're from around here? You're not New York born and bred?"

Daniel stiffened. "I never said I was, Chris. Don't start accusing me of—"

"So what, you never said? There's a lot you never said! You let me go on thinking all kinds of nonsense about you, not telling me you were from New England, that you had a theater...that...that." She grabbed his shoulders, wishing she could shake him. Her eyes were wide and she stared into his brown ones—would she ever tire of them?—and her fingers tightened their grip. "Oh Daniel," she wailed. "All the anguish and rationalizing you would have saved me."

"Anguish, Chris?"

"Yes, Daniel, anguish. Because...I love you."

The hand on her face was like a brand, and Chris wanted nothing more than to flow into Daniel's arms and nestle there forever. She leaned forward, but his other hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Chris." His voice was strangled, husky. "Are you sure? You don't know—"

She silenced him by lightly touching his lips with her fingertips. "I know what I have to know. I know that I need you."

"Sweetheart," he rasped, "you don't know how much I need you."

She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder, pulling her body tight against his. She shared the tremor that shook him, and began kissing the sweet-smelling



skin of his throat. "Take what you need, Daniel," she offered, then lightly bit him.

"Ah, Chris." He sighed. "I take only as good as I give. And I promise to give you the best love I can."

His hands were stroking her back now, relaying all sorts of provocative suggestions to her body, but Chris paid them no mind. She pushed away from him, her eyes searching his handsome face. "Love?" she choked out.

His smile was like the sun after a summer thunderstorm. "Yes, sweet. Love."

"Oh, Daniel, are you sure?"

The smile widened to include the rainbow. "Haven't we already had this discussion?"

She continued staring at him, her mouth agape, still not quite believing she had heard correctly. Daniel loved her? They shared a love? This marvelous looking man with his charming smile and wry humor and gentle warmth and seductive caresses and—

Her litany was halted abruptly by his kiss, and then Chris didn't have to bother with cataloging his charms. He graciously revealed them to her . . . and she revealed hers in reply.



Chris held her breath as the last measures of the finale were sung, each voice in harmony. Then the play was over, the lights suddenly out. Chris began applauding, along with the several hundred other people that had turned out for opening night of *Kiss Me Kate*. The stage lights were turned back on as the cast came out for its curtain calls.

Chris tried not to think of how sore her own hands were becoming. It was a surprisingly large cast. But finally the principals were on stage, Toni and Daniel, and the crowd was cheering them enthusiastically. Chris realized she was wearing a foolish grin as she drank in the sight of Daniel illuminated by the bright

colored lights—his shining hair and his flashing grin, even the confident ease of his body movements as he took Toni's hand, and the rest of the cast joined them for one final bow.

The stage was at one end of the park, almost up against a tall, thick hedge that divided the park in two. The backstage area was cut off from the public by a high wooden fence that always reminded Chris of the walls of a fort in cowboy and Indian movies. She skirted the stage and the many people milling about to a side-door entrance through the fence. They could hear the cast inside loudly celebrating the success of the show. Chris had to bang on the locked door a few times before she got any response.

Daniel himself opened the door and cried out a welcome when he saw her, sweeping her into a back-cracking embrace.

"You were wonderful—" Chris began, but the sudden appearance of a rather somber man in a sports jacket silenced her.

"Daniel Collins?" the stranger asked.

"Yes," Daniel answered slowly, letting his arms drop to his sides.

"I'm Harold Sweeney." He held out his hand.

Daniel took it with alacrity, startling Chris. "Why, Mr. Sweeney. Welcome to Portsmouth. I'm very glad to meet you."

Chris frowned, puzzled. What was that tone in Daniel's voice? The name Sweeney was vaguely familiar to Chris, a name she'd heard in New York. But why was a New Yorker up here? And why were he and Daniel going off together, with Daniel only casting her a brief apologetic look?

Chris made her way through the groups of ecstatic actors and family and friends to Toni. She was surrounded by quite a number of people, but Chris managed to maneuver through to her sister's side and



tapped her on her shoulder.

"Can I give my congrats?" she asked when Toni turned.

"Oh, Chris!" Once again Chris found herself enveloped in a forceful hug. "It went off so well, didn't it?"

"Yes, Toni, it did." Chris patted her sister on the back, hoping she'd be freed before the smell of the greasepaint overcame her.

Fortunately Toni did release her then. "And Daniel was marvelous, wasn't he?" Toni continued.

"Magnificent."

"Have you seen him yet? Where is he?"

Chris gestured to where Daniel and Harold Sweeney were still talking, apparently oblivious to the mayhem around them. "This Harold Sweeney collared him a few minutes ago." She snorted. "Daniel looked so awestruck, I half-expected him to call him 'massa.'"

Toni stared at the two men for a moment, then looked back at Chris. "And well he should," she said in a low voice, her exuberance suddenly dissipated. "Harold Sweeney is backing what's rumored to be next season's biggest Broadway hit."

Chris felt the color drain from her face. Now that her sister had mentioned it, the name Sweeney was ringing all sorts of bells. He had definitely been a behind-the-scenes character up until a season or two ago. Now it seemed he was taking a much more active role in the plays he was backing. That might explain his coming to Portsmouth and seeking out Daniel, but what about Daniel's reaction? He had said he'd had enough of New York, but now...

Finding a corner that was somewhat safe from the jostling crowds, Chris scanned the large area for Daniel. She found him quickly, his blond hair glinting in the strong overhead lights, still talking to

Sweeney in the same place. She watched as Sweeney glanced at his watch, said something more to Daniel, then Daniel looked up, directly at Chris.

She was slightly embarrassed that he had caught her staring at him, and smiled tremulously, hoping he wouldn't read her true feelings on her face. Daniel turned back to Sweeney, gestured toward her, then left the man and began walking her way. Chris straightened against the wall, instructing herself not to let any anger or concern show, not in front of all these people. Their love was too young to risk a public scene.

"Chris," Daniel's voice said, and she turned to face him. "Mr. Sweeney asked if I could join him for a drink once I got cleaned up."

Chris firmly told her rising fear to stay hidden and her few acting skills not to fail her now. "Why don't you go as Petruccio, Daniel? He's really a perfect role for you a lot of the time." She smiled as sickly sweetly as she could, then turned to the exit. Daniel, as she might have expected, grabbed her arm.

"What kind of snide remark was that?" he practically growled into her ear.

"How many different kinds of snide remarks are there?" Chris snapped back, determined not to look at him.

But Daniel merely stepped in front of her, grabbing her other arm and holding her in place. "You know what I meant, Chris." His voice was low and just a little menacing, rather like how the character Petruchio might have talked to his wife.

Chris wasn't going to give in. "People are looking at us, Daniel," she hissed.

"That's right. You don't like being the center of attention, do you, Chrissie?" He drew her closer to him so that she could feel the heat of his body. She also believed she could feel other people's eyes burning into her. *I'll kill him*, she told herself. *I'll just plain kill him.* "What's

bothering you about this?" Daniel was continuing. "Are you ashamed that you finally fell for an actor? You don't want everyone to know whom you're involved with?"

Chris pulled herself from his grasp. "If I'm ashamed of you, it's because of the way you're behaving. No, I don't like people staring at me, and I certainly don't like them to know my private business. If you're such the consummate actor that you have to dramatize everything in your life for some damn audience, be my guest. Just let me off the stage first." Why were they arguing about this? How senseless, Chris thought wildly as she watched Daniel's expression harden. She hadn't wanted an argument at all, but if there was one, why wasn't it about Sweeney?

She opened her mouth to say something that would smooth over this strife, but Daniel forestalled her. "This is ridiculous, Chris. I just came over here to tell you that I'll be by your place later tonight, and we can celebrate then."

Chris shook her head. It was already after eleven. "No, Daniel. Tomorrow's Saturday, my big day at the restaurant, and I've got to get there extra early. I can't stay up until all hours waiting for you." At least her work was a convenient excuse.

"I'm just going to have one drink with him, Chris."

Her reserve snapped. "So go have your one bloody drink with him," she cried, uncaring who heard her now, ignoring the startled expression on Daniel's face. "Then go back to your homey apartment and call me tomorrow and tell me all about the marvelous offer he's made you and when you'll be leaving for New York." She whirled around him, striding quickly to the door and pushing it open with such force that it swung into the wall with a loud crash.

The Saturday lunch business the following day was surprisingly light, much to Chris's annoyance. She was even praying for a catastrophe or two, anything that would keep her mind off Daniel. But as her hands automatically dished out seafood Newburg, sliced thick slices of bread for sandwiches, occasionally stirred the clam chowder simmering on low heat, her thoughts were spinning over Daniel, remembering what had happened the previous night.

She wondered how many people in the small town were aware that the costume designer and the lead actor, once a hot item, had a horrendous quarrel in public last night. If it were New York, and Daniel were as big an actor as he apparently wanted to be, she could probably read all about it in the *Post*.

"Chris?"

She swung around at Linda's voice.

There was a long pause. "Yes?" Chris prompted.

Linda came farther into the kitchen, then leaned close to Chris, "I think you'd better check out who just came in," she whispered.

"The governor?" Chris quipped, knowing full well who it was. She went to the door anyway and cautiously peered out.

"In the back, by the windows," Linda directed.

Chris spotted them instantly. They were at the corner table, which the early afternoon sun was already leaving in the shade. Daniel sat in the back, facing the rest of the room and the kitchen. Mr. Sweeney sat opposite him.

Chris's back stiffened as she watched them peruse their menus. After a moment she drew her head back. "He's got some nerve," she muttered.

Linda nodded emphatically in agreement. "Want me to throw him out?"

Chris stared blankly at Linda for a sec-

ond, then chuckled. "Now, that would be interesting. But..." She paused, then started to grin. "Give me your pad, will you, Linda."

Linda happily handed over her small pad of green checks and her pen. "Give 'em hell, boss," she whispered, swinging a fist through the air.

Daniel's eyes were on her the moment she walked through the door. Chris took her time weaving her way to the distant table, giving Daniel every opportunity to study her. When she was almost at the table, Mr. Sweeney finally turned around, as if to see what had captured his lunch companion's attention.

Chris smiled broadly at the two men. "Good afternoon. Have you decided what you want to order?" She turned to Mr. Sweeney first, ignoring the inviting then puzzled expression on Daniel's face:

"What's the special today?" Mr. Sweeney asked.

Chris's eyes narrowed slightly. There was something about this man's voice that she didn't care for. "Seafood Newburg," she responded perfunctorily.

"I'll have that then."

Chris scribbled the order on the pad, then finally turned to Daniel. Her immediate thought was that she should never have come out here. Daniel's face was tender, as if he wanted to make up for last night's fight here and now. His eyes were glowing with a special warmth and his lips were slightly parted, as though he might kiss her any instant. Chris almost swayed against the table from the impact of that thought, but managed to hold herself steady.

"You look great, Chris," he said abruptly, his voice soft and suggestive as his eyes leisurely traveled the length of her body and back.

"Thanks," she said shortly. "Nice show last night." What had made her say that, for heaven's sake?

Daniel looked a little startled, too, but Mr. Sweeney perked up instantly. "It certainly was... Chris, is it?" Chris nodded, amazed at the change in the man's voice. It had gone from smooth and bland to excited and alive. "This young man"—he nodded toward Daniel—"has a great future ahead of him now. Very great."

Chris looked quickly at Daniel, who was squirming slightly as he stared out the window, then back to Sweeney. "Oh, really? And why is that?"

"Well"—Sweeney looked around—"I don't think it'll do any damage to tell you. Mr. Daniel Collins here is going to have the lead in my show next season. Once the critics see him opening night, there'll be no stopping him," he predicted happily.

"Oh?" Daniel was still looking out the window. "You mean he can go anywhere he wants?" She noticed Daniel's body shifted almost imperceptibly at her question.

"Figuratively speaking, no doubt about it," Sweeney answered.

"Oh, no. I wasn't speaking figuratively, I was speaking physically. *He* can go anywhere... like leave New York?"

Sweeney looked positively astounded. "Why would he want to leave New York when he's the toast of the town?" Sweeney's tone indicated that he thought Chris was no better than a country bumpkin.

"Why indeed?" Chris murmured, annoyed that Daniel made no effort to join the conversation. His silence was further condemning him in her mind. "What would you like for lunch, Mr. Collins?" she asked him in an impersonal voice.

Daniel looked up then. "I'll have the fish chowder and tabouli salad," he ordered.

"It's clam chowder today," she corrected him, annoyed that her voice was a little shaky.

"Whatever you have, I'll take."

She gaped at him, at his nerve to utter such a provocative statement in front of Mr. Sweeney. She finished writing out the order, snatched up the menus, managed a small smile for the two men and then walked as decorously back to the kitchen as she could. Once there she blindly assembled their order.

She made it to the table without spilling anything. Just like riding a bike, she told herself as she began edging the clam chowder down to Daniel's place. Both he and Sweeney had glanced up when she reached them, but then went on with their discussion. Chris took as much time as she could, unabashedly eavesdropping.

"The part's tailor-made for you, Daniel," Sweeney was saying rapidly. "I told you that last night. Boy from the sticks coming to the big city, thinks he's making it, then finds out he's on the wrong side of the tracks."

"Are you implying," Daniel said evenly, flashing Chris a quick smile when she set down the oyster crackers, "that I'm 'from the sticks' and on the 'wrong side of the tracks'?"

Chris slowly lowered the seafood Newburg in front of Sweeney, but he took no notice.

"Not exactly, Daniel. I wouldn't put it so crudely. You are from New England, not even Boston but—where did you say?"

"And you are doing okay in New York, but it's been small time. You haven't had the crowds of hundreds on their feet cheering for more. But you deserve that, and I can give it to you."

"He's already had it." Chris's voice surprised even her. It was low and strong, with that special undertone an actor needs to cultivate in order to project his voice without shouting. "In case you failed to notice, Mr. Sweeney," she said, trying to block out the sight of Daniel's still too handsome face, "Just last night there

were several hundred people cheering for more. I would not say Daniel Collins was on the 'wrong side of the tracks' then."

Apparently unfazed by this attack from a strange source, Sweeney waved a hand nonchalantly. "Summer theater in New Hampshire. So what? It lasts for two months, which leaves an additional ten months for the actor to try to feed himself. Last night's show was very nice, but Daniel is capable of much, much more." He smiled at Daniel as if to reassure him.

"Theater-by-the-Sea is a year-round repertory theater," Chris argued, her hands now on her hips. "That would account for those ten months."

Sweeney favored Chris with the long-suffering look of a man with saintly patience. "New Hampshire, I repeat, is not New York. Who would know him here?" He waved a hand toward the rest of the room.

"Who would know him in New York?" Chris retorted. "One audience is much the same as another, I've noticed. The differences are on the inside—the theater, the actors, the techies."

Sweeney apparently was giving up on her. He turned back to the table and picked up his spoon. "You're just missing the point, my dear," he commented almost absentmindedly. "New York is where actors make it; it's from whence all things flow, or some such trite phrase. You've probably been all excited about having a New York actor in town, honey." He looked back up at her. "You've probably even slept with him, and now you don't want him to leave." He went on, ignoring Chris's gasp and Daniel's sudden violent movement. "But all that glitter will rub off him quick enough if he hangs around here." Sweeney shrugged. "You could always visit him in New York, honey. It's a great town." He turned back to his lunch, but it was no longer there.

Chris never did figure out what happened, whether it was Daniel's abrupt rise from his chair that jarred the table or her own hand as she reached out to grab the padded shoulder of Sweeney's Brooks Brothers suit. But the Newburg slid right off the table and into the New Yorker's lap.

For a moment all three were motionless, as if trying to convince themselves that what they had just seen had really happened. Then Sweeney stiffened as if in pain, and Chris suddenly realized that although no longer steaming, the Newburg must have been quite hot.

"I'll get some rags," she called as she practically flew across the dining room to the kitchen. Behind her she heard a clattering crash and surmised that Sweeney had stood and the pottery dish had broken on the floor.

When she returned a few moments later, Chris saw that only a few of the customers appeared interested in the goings-on at the corner table. There Sweeney was standing to one side, ineffectually wiping at himself with a soaked napkin while Daniel picked up pieces of pottery from the floor.

"Here." Chris shoved a damp cloth at Sweeney. "This'll help." She quickly turned away, trying hard to quell the giggle that was building in her throat. Considering the whole situation and the way they had all been acting, it was quite amusing. Any of the three of them had deserved the Newburg in their laps, although Chris really did think Sweeney was the best choice. She stooped down and began industriously wiping off the chair, ignoring the blond head bent so close to her.

As if suddenly realizing how near she was, Daniel looked up at Chris and grinned. "Good teamwork," he whispered, his eyes dancing.

Chris started to smile in return, feeling her heart begin to thaw, but Linda joined them at that instant.

"Sure did make a mess, didn't you, boss?" she observed as she towered over Daniel and Chris."

Linda's voice was not what could be called soft and gentle, and neither was Daniel's laugh. From behind the waitress Chris could see that more than a few customers were now looking their way. She took one more swipe at the chair, then straightened.

Handing Linda the sticky cloth, she said, "Close up for me today." She turned on her heel, walked briskly into the kitchen, grabbed her bag, and left the restaurant.

---

It was almost sunset. The mountains in the distance were a dark, heathery color, and the valley below was disappearing rapidly. Chris stood alone in the field of wildflowers, admiring the brightly colored sky. Something about the splashes of orange and red and pink against the azure sky and lavender and deep purple clouds was shockingly familiar, as though she had seen this same sunset before and knew which colors would last, which would darken first, which clouds would dissipate.

A gentle breeze wafted across the field, tossing the grasses and the wildflowers and Chris's hair and dress. She absentmindedly caught the skirt in one hand, holding it steady against her legs. For one magical moment she felt a complete calm, thoroughly at peace with herself and the world about her. That peacefulness had been building since she had walked out of her restaurant the day before. She had walked out to stop herself from announcing to the world at large that she loved Daniel Collins and would follow him to the edges of the earth, including New York, if that's what he wanted. She didn't

know why the thought had struck her at that particular moment, but it had been so uncompromising that she had needed solitude in order to face and accept it.

So she had spent the remainder of the afternoon and the entire evening alone in her apartment, reviewing every moment she could remember of her time with Daniel, searching for a simple explanation. There wasn't one, she knew now. She had only at some point, or perhaps even slowly, a piece at a time, given all of herself to Daniel, committed herself to him as she had known she would the morning after they first made love. She had been fighting against that commitment, but there truly was no denying it. She felt euphoric, yet oddly reserved.

So, that afternoon, Chris had showered, washed her hair, smoothed lightly scented creams that she rarely used over her body, then put on an extravagantly fancy dress. She had then walked to her sister's nearby condominium, ignoring the strange looks she was getting from people for wearing a formal gown in the afternoon.

Toni had been a little startled at Chris's appearance, too, and even more surprised at her younger sister's request for her car.

"Leaving town?" Toni had asked as she handed Chris the keys to her car.

"Um-hm," Chris answered as she dropped the keys into her small evening bag. "But I'll be back." She cocked her head, then asked, "Would you do me a favor?" Toni shrugged. "Call Daniel for me."

Toni shook her head. "Oh, no. I never get involved in lovers' quarrels. You should call Daniel yourself. Unless..." Toni paused, eyeing Chris's gown speculatively.

"Right," Chris said briskly. "I'm a surprise for him. I just want you to tell him where to find me."

"Juvenile cloak-and-dagger stuff and

nonsense," Toni scoffed. Chris merely stared unwaveringly at her sister until Toni sighed. "Okay, against my better judgment. I'll do it. What do I tell him?"

Chris stared out a window at the tree branches that were dancing with the light breeze. "Tell him... tell him he can find me on the road to Contoocook."

Now she waited in the field of wildflowers at sunset, hoping that Toni for once would prove a reliable messenger.

The roar of a car climbing Putney Hill Road destroyed the peaceful stillness of the evening, sending the last few remaining birds into a frenzy of song and scolding. Chris didn't turn, but her fingers tightened their hold on her dress..

She nervously fingered the soft material as she heard the car approach then turn onto the gravel driveway of the large white farmhouse. She held her breath as the car door opened, slammed shut, and footsteps crunched along the drive. Then there was silence as the person entered the field. Chris forced her fingers to release her skirt and lie still, pulled her shoulders back, and lifted her chin.

"Chris?" The voice was tentative, soft, and low, and directly in back of her.

Her fingers balled into fists of their own accord. "Hello, Daniel," she answered, pleased her own voice was cool and level.

There was a moment of awkward silence and Chris vaguely noticed that most of the sun was gone and the sky was darkening rapidly.

Then came a deep sigh from behind, and Daniel's hands were suddenly heavy on her shoulders. For a moment they lay passively, but the fingers soon began gently massaging the tight muscles there. Chris felt herself relax slightly against her will, and her stiff posture gave way to a more normal stance.

"That's better," Daniel murmured. Without warning his grip tightened and he forced her to turn to face him. Chris



barely had time to lift her eyes to his and begin to speak, when Daniel's eyes closed and his mouth descended on hers.

No! Chris wanted to shout, but it was too late. At the first persuasive touch of his lips against hers, she was lost to him. She allowed him to take possession of her, allowed her body to mold to his as he wrapped his long arms about her. The kiss might have lasted for hours for all Chris was aware, but when Daniel pulled away, the evening didn't appear much darker.

He smiled down at her, then nudged her head so that she rested it against his shoulder. "That's even better," he said as he stroked her back.

Chris nodded as her arms encircled his waist, not particularly interested in starting up a conversation. For several minutes they stood there in each other's arms. Chris felt she could happily stay there forever; the feel of Daniel's firm, lean body against hers was so comfortable and soothing. She sighed and moved her head so that she was within kissing distance of Daniel's tanned throat. She even contemplated exploring that throat with her lips and tongue, when she remembered why she had asked him to come.

She pushed herself out of his embrace abruptly. "I have something to tell you," she announced, focusing on the little sports car beyond his left shoulder.

"Oh?" Daniel took a step back and folded his arms across his chest.

"I...um...well..." How could she phrase it without sounding pushy? What if he really didn't want her to come with him anyhow? What if this were just a summer fling for him?

No, no, she argue with herself. What they'd shared was not a fleeting summer fancy. Just close your eyes and plunge right in, she told herself.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I love you and if you want to go back to New York it's okay because I'd

like to go with you." It all came out in a rush, and she wondered if he had even been able to understand her.

When silence continued for too long, she feared he really hadn't understood her, and she opened one eye to look at him. He was still there, his mouth slightly ajar, his eyes a little unfocused. Her other eye popped open, she was so startled at the incredulous look on his face. She reached up with one hand and gently cupped his chin.

"You'll swallow a fly with your mouth open like that," she warned him.

Daniel closed his mouth and swallowed hard. "I'm not even going to ask you to repeat what you just said," he finally muttered. "I don't want to know if I misunderstood you." He grabbed her by the upper arms. "Would you really go to New York with me, Chris?"

She was surprised that his voice held an urgency in it, and her smile deepened. "I thought you weren't going to ask me to repeat myself."

He groaned and abruptly pulled her against him. His embrace was not gentle, but Chris didn't mind. She squeezed him hard around the waist, certain that this meant her offer had been accepted. But, just to make sure...

"Does this mean I get to go back to New York?" she asked happily, disregarding the fact that she usually considered happy and New York contradictory terms.

His one-word answer was muffled because he was kissing her hair, but Chris was pretty sure it had been a no. She tried to push away from him, but Daniel's arms were too tight around her.

"Did you say no?" she finally gasped.

He paused long enough to say "I did," then his lips were nibbling their way across her cheek, up to her eyelids and brows, down her nose, then finally halting after a quick peck on her mouth. "Why," he



muttered, his mouth still against hers, "would I want you to go to New York when I'm staying here?"

She stood perfectly still, not even breathing. She was certain her heart had stopped beating too. "Don't tease, Daniel," she managed to whisper, despite the sudden dryness in her throat.

He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her away a little. His eyes locked onto hers and Chris was startled to see pain there. "I'm not teasing, Chris," he said quietly. One hand reached up to stroke her hair. His eyes followed his hand for a moment, and he added wonderingly, "It still shimmers, even in this dim light." She jerked her head back from his caress and started to twist away from him, but his grasp tightened and his eyes focused on her face again. "Okay. I just got a little sidetracked for a moment." He grinned ingenuously, and Chris couldn't help but smile back.

"That's the way," Daniel continued cheerfully. "Now, I am not going to New York, Chris. Repeat, *not*." Her smile grew. "I must admit, though, I was very tempted by Sweeney's offer. Hell!" His voice hardened suddenly, and his hands dropped from her shoulders and he whirled away. "*Tempted* isn't the word for it."

Chris let loose in a heavy sigh the breath she had been holding. Daniel turned back to her and stood only inches away, but didn't touch her. "But when I really thought about it, I knew I couldn't go back to New York. I don't need the aggravation, those people, or"—he smiled wryly, almost self-mockingly—the fame."

Chris let him go no further. Crying out his name, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed her body tightly against his. His arms immediately enclosed her, and he buried his face in her hair.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?"

"Oh, Daniel." She twisted about

slightly in his arms so that she could see his face. "Of course you are. But I can't blame you, one bit for being tempted. And, besides, what can beat Broadway and Times Square with its X-rated movies, sex shops, prost—"

Daniel laughed and squeezed her tighter, effectively cutting off any further speech from her.

Then they were silent for a moment and simply held each other, rocking slightly as the evening darkened into night.

"We should probably go, darling," he finally suggested.

"Umm."

His hands moved gently across her back. "What is this dress you're wearing, Chris? I meant to tell you when I first saw you that you look very beautiful and, uh, tempting."

She laughed. "Good. I wanted to convince you not to leave me behind."

"Leave you behind?" His arms tightened again. "Chris, I figured I'd have to give you the moon in order to convince you to come with me. And when I got your message, and found you in this magnificent dress and your shining hair, looking like some Greek goddess standing here, commanding the sunset. . . And you offered to go with me!" He released a long sigh. "Chrissie, I don't deserve you."

She snuggled deeper into his arms. "Sure don't."

Daniel's forceful mouth on hers stopped any more talk, but that was fine with her. She entwined her fingers through the soft hair at the back of his neck as his tongue slipped into her mouth. She met it eagerly with her own, and felt a sudden blaze and glow, as though the sun had risen again and was blessing them with its glorious, torrid heat. Then, as his mouth left hers and began the journey down her neck and the skin exposed by the dress, the golden glow was transformed into all the brilliant colors of the sunset.

WHY PAY  
MORE!

**Special  
Low Price!** NOW ONLY **\$5.88**

## New Portable Easy-Pull Stomach Trimmer

**A Slimmer, Younger Look In  
2 Weeks . . . GUARANTEED**



**FREE Exercise  
Instructions  
PORTABLE, LIGHTWEIGHT  
—Use It Anywhere!**

**AS SEEN ON TV  
FOR \$19.95**

**FOR MEN, WOMEN, TEENS—Every Active Person! Just 5 TO  
10 MINUTES A DAY—Perfect For Your Busy Schedule**

**Use It In Your Home . . . Office . . . Hotel Room . . .  
Everywhere!** Very easy to carry in your gym bag or  
an over-nighter . . . Just whip it out whenever you  
have a few spare minutes, and enjoy a healthful,  
invigorating workout.

**Why Put Up With A Fat Sagging Stomach . . . Have  
A Shape You Can Be Proud Of!** This is the same type  
of exerciser that's all the rage in Europe. Now  
you'll look great in all your clothes—even the  
skimpiest bikini! Just pull up . . . relax . . . pull up . . .  
relax . . . to tone and tighten those muscles. Durable  
steel-spring construction folded size 17x11 inches.  
Easy instructions.

**GUARANTEED: Measurable Results in Just 5 To 10  
Minutes A Day! Or—return for full refund of purchase  
price (except ship. & hdg.). Our policy is to process  
all orders promptly. We charge your credit card only  
when order is shipped. Delays notified promptly.  
Shipment guaranteed within 60 days.**

**• SATISFACTION GUARANTEED—MAIL TODAY! •**

**OLD VILLAGE SHOP, Dept. VZ-5118  
Bldg. #9, Hanover, PA 17333**

Yes, please rush *Easy Pull Stomach Trimmer(s)*  
(Z534131) on full money-back guarantee..

- ☐ One for only \$5.88 plus \$2.95 ship. & hdg.  
☐ **SAVE!** Two for just \$10.00 plus \$3.95 ship-  
ping & handling.

Encl. is \$\_\_\_\_\_ (PA and NV res. add sales tax)

**CHARGE IT:** ☐ Diners Club ☐ VISA  
☐ American Express ☐ MasterCard

Acct. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

© H.H.I., Inc. 1987

"Daniel," she whispered urgently, causing him to momentarily halt his scorching kisses across the sensitive skin of her throat. "Let's recreate the sunset."

His hands glided up and down her sides, lingering at the gentle curve of her hips. Then he straightened and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "No, let's create a new one of our own."

Without giving her a chance to reply, he took her hand and began leading her, not to the cars, but to the house.

"Daniel." Chris tried rescuing her hand, tried dragging her heels, but it was useless. "Where are we going?"

"Right here."

They had reached the front door and Daniel took down a key from a well-hidden hook by the wooden frame. Chris watched with amazement as he opened the screen door, fitted the key to the lock, then pushed the inner door open. He reached inside and flicked a switch, lighting the front hallway brightly by a large chandelier. Daniel started to go in, but Chris held her ground.

"Whose house is this?" she demanded.

He turned, surprise on his face, but Chris couldn't tell if it was real or acted. "Didn't I tell you? Sam, the guy who helped me start the theater, lives here. He's out of town, and he's always told me

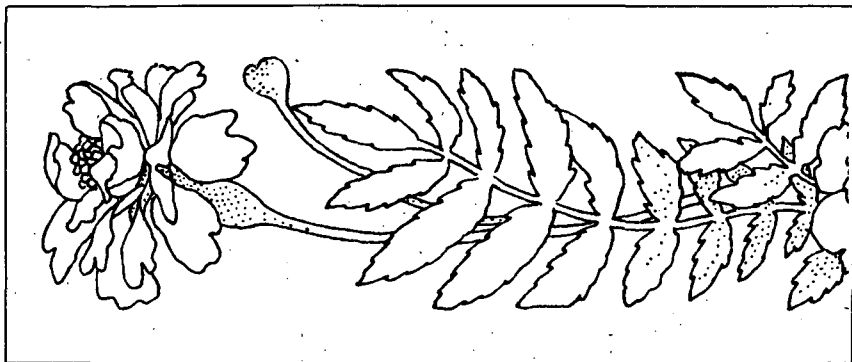
I could use the house whenever I liked." Obviously satisfied with his explanation, he started into the house again.

But Chris held back, still uncertain, a little awed at the sight of expensive wallpaper in the hallway and the well-cared-for antiques. "But, Daniel. To use it for... for..." she faltered.

He turned back again, this time with eyes dancing with laughter. "He never specified, sweetheart." The laughter quickly left his eyes as they traveled the length of her. "But I intend to use it for making a proposal... after I've made a certain proposition! You are so beautiful, Chris," he whispered, and she trembled at the desire she heard in his low voice. "But even if you weren't, I would still love you. Oh, God, Chris," he moaned, and reached for her, embracing her fervently.

Pleasure rippled through Chris, as gentle and sweet as a cooling sea breeze on a hot day. But the pleasure was almost instantly enveloped in a more powerful sensation—the sensation of love—and she gladly gave herself up to it, reveling in its force as she might tumble in the surf of the ocean.

"Daniel," she murmured, her lips brushing through his hair, across his scratchy cheek, finding his warm mouth, "about that sunset..." ♥





# *My Wild Irish Rogue*

---

*Ingrid Petersen's logic and Liam Clare's magic meet in a head-on crash, and passion flares. But will they realize in time that, if either wins this battle, both will lose their chance for love?*

---

—HELEN CARTER—

It looked as if the rain was stopping. Ingrid Peterson checked her watch; it was four p.m. She had moved it ahead the requisite five hours when her plane put down at Shannon, but her recalcitrant body was lingering in the time zone she left behind. That, combined with a lost night's sleep, wasn't improving her mood. Did her cab driver have to be so insistently cheerful? He'd been chattering nonstop.

"I haven't seen Castle Clare myself," the

driver said. "It's brand-new."

"Castles are supposed to be old," Ingrid said grumpily.

"Brand-new as a hotel is what I mean. The castle itself goes way back. Sixteenth century . . . or is it the fourteenth?"

"I don't think I care." Ingrid had no interest in romantic medievalism. "As long as it's got plumbing, heating, and a bed."

Ingrid had been in transit for more than fourteen hours. First came the flight from

Washington, D.C., to La Guardia in New York, then the shuttle bus to John F. Kennedy Airport, and then the transatlantic flight to Shannon. Thank goodness she'd come a day early! The sociology conference she was here to attend didn't officially start until tomorrow, so she could spend the rest of the day catching up on lost sleep. All she wanted was a cup of decent coffee and a comfortable bed. She might even skip the coffee. Just bring on that bed.

"How much farther?" she asked.

"Just a bit now, miss. Around this bend and you should be able to see Castle Clare. There... there it is... to the right on that hill there."

In the distance, the gray stone structure was silhouetted against the sky. Two square towers girded the rectangle of the castle keep and a taller round tower jutted skyward. It looked imposing and... forbidding. Ingrid remembered that many castles were originally built as fortresses.

Suddenly, there was a break in the hovering clouds and the sun streaked through. First a narrow shaft, then a widening flow of gold, gilding the round tower and imparting a reddish glow to the eastern wall of the castle. No longer forbidding, it became a fairy-tale castle. Beautiful... and unreal.

Then something very real diverted Ingrid's attention. The driver had slowed down, then stopped dead. Ahead of them, the road was blocked by a truck. Rather, it was blocked by a load of what looked like black bricks, which must have fallen off the truck. A tall man, his work pants stuffed into knee-high boots, and two teen-aged boys were gathering up the bricks. The boys were actually doing most of the work while the dark-haired giant harangued them. Ingrid lowered her window and heard him yell, "That's what you get, Billy Heffernan! Piling the turf so high just so you wouldn't have to make

two trips!"

"Don't yell at me," one of the boys protested. "It was George's idea."

"You're both asses, then."

They didn't seem bothered by the slight. Probably used to his abuse, Ingrid thought sympathetically.

"How long d'ya think you'll be?" her taxi driver called out.

The man strolled over. "As long as it takes to stack that turf," he snapped. The words were directed at the driver, but his eyes met on Ingrid's. Dark green eyes, she noticed, startling against his tawny skin. His arched brows were ink-black, matching the unruly hair that fell over his forehead.

The driver nodded. How could he accept such an unsatisfactory answer? Ingrid leaned out her window. "And just how long will that be?" she asked.

The man came and bent over her window, resting his arms on the edge and bringing his face disconcertingly close to hers. Rain moistened his face and drops glinted from his hair. There was an insistent quality in his appraising look and insolence in his slight smile. Ingrid pulled back a little, resisting the temptation to do just the opposite.

"Are you on your way to Castle Clare?" he asked. The voice was deep and mellow, with just a suggestion of brogue.

"I would be—if you weren't barring the way. How long will it take to clear that stuff away?"

"The turf, you mean?" When he arched his eyebrows, one rose quizzically higher than the other. "Never seen turf before?"

"No, of course not."

Suddenly, he opened the car door. "Come on out, then, and have a look."

"Why should I?" she gasped. What an exasperating man! He grinned amiably. What an *attractive*, exasperating man!

"To learn something about the country

you're visiting. Travel is supposed to broaden your mind. The only thing that's broadened sitting in a taxi or a fancy hotel lobby is... I think you know." He extended his hand. "Have a look. Maybe with some encouragement from you, those worthless boys will get a move on."

Ingrid ignored the hand and stepped out of the car. At the moment, the two youths weren't moving at all, their smiling interest centered on Ingrid and the farmer.

"What are you gawking at?" he yelled. Taking her elbow, he steered Ingrid over to the side of the road. How warm his hand was, or was that her own blood reacting to the firm strength of his fingers? She pulled away to release herself.

The farmer knelt to pick up one of the rectangular black pieces; when he stood again, she realized how tall he was.

Ingrid was almost five-nine. "Statuesque blonde" was a description often used to describe her, with her Nordic blue eyes and long, white-blond hair, but this man towered over her. Musclemen had never appealed to her. Rex Harrison—the young *My Fair Lady* Rex Harrison—was more to her taste. But this man, so physically overwhelming, had an odd magnetism...

*You're too groggy to think straight*, she told herself.

"Here," he said. She took the brick he handed her.

"Why, it's so light," she said with surprise.

"Turf. Cut right out of the earth itself." He pointed to the pits dug into the field behind them. "Mother nature's gift to Ireland."

She turned the bar over in her hands, feeling the embedded threads of dried vegetation. "What's it used for?"

"Fuel. Not as efficient as coal, but lighter, and much cheaper, especially if

you own the fields."

Then he proceeded to describe the turf-cutting operation. She listened, or tried to. What was with her? In college, Ingrid had always had the enviable faculty of being able to concentrate on a lecture and retain the information. As a traveler, she sought educational experiences and listened avidly to knowledgeable guides. Why was she having trouble now? Maybe because her senses were engaged in absorbing so many other impressions: the loamy smell of earth mingling with the fresh breeze, the sun spreading light atop the green branches of the large oak whose lower limbs still dripped with rain, and making diamonds out of the drops clinging to the grasses. And her almost kinesthetic awareness of the man next to her, the man who seemed part of all this, the earth and rain and sun.

The taxi driver's voice was a jarring note. "I think we can get by now, miss—that is, if you've a mind to go."

"Oh... of course." The man followed her to the car and opened her door. "Thanks for educating me about turf," she said lightly.

"Don't mention it. It's my contribution to the enlightenment of the tourist. I've all kinds of other useful information, if you're inclined." Was his smile mocking, or just roguish? It was ridiculous to assume this man was seriously hitting on her. He was just giving his Irish gift of gab flirtatious exercise. Nothing more.

"Good-bye now," she said firmly.

"Good-bye... for now," he answered softly, then stepped back as the driver started off.

What had he meant by that postscript to his "good-bye"? Nothing, probably. It was unlikely that she would see him again. Unless he dropped another load of turf in her path when she returned to Shannon Airport five days from now. Flirting with a female visitor could have been another

of his contributions to the tourist trade. It had been an amusing incident to start her visit, she told herself. Nothing more.

To distract her wayward thoughts, Ingrid directed her attention to Castle Clare. As they drew closer, the western aspect was still in shadow, while the east wall and the tower were bathed in sunlight: dark and light, battle fortress and fairy-tale castle both, a magical schizophrenia. A strange place for a convocation of sociologists. A strange place for *her*.

Suddenly, the weariness she had almost forgotten returned. She would register, take a hot shower, and crawl into bed.



She might have to crawl the rest of the way to her room, Ingrid thought, as she trudged after the young man carrying her suitcase. What a labyrinth of corridors. A long labyrinth.

"Where in the world is this room?" she finally called out.

"Just this way, miss." He held open a large oak door studded with nailheads leading to an arched passageway that was open on one side. When they reached the end, on the left were steps down to a small connecting bridge with an entrance to the circular tower at its other end.

"There?" she asked with disbelief. "The dungeon?"

"No. 'Tisn't a dungeon, though. That's where Mr. Clare has his apartment."

So there was an actual Clare associated with Castle Clare. No title? Curious. She'd have to ask about him—some other time. The bellboy took the turn on the right, through another door and into a large hall. It was bare except for the display of weapons, swords, lances, and axes on one wall, and suits of armor in each corner and flanking the huge fireplace.

In the next corridor was a series of closed doors. Mercifully, he opened the

closest and stepped in. "Here we are."

Ingrid followed and stopped short, staring. "Just *where* are we?" she asked finally. "I think I'm caught in a time warp. Did we just lose eight centuries?"

"This is the old wing."

Ingrid looked around. Faded tapestries covered two of the walls; four small Oriental rugs in shades of gold and burgundy were on the floor, but her heels clicked loudly on the expanses of planked wood. Even the large, raised hearth fireplace opposite the bed looked austere and ugly. The bed was short and square, as wide as it was long. An antique, probably, built for small people who'd lived in a pre-vitamin era. It had a rose-patterned brocade canopy and coverlet.

"Old is an understatement," Ingrid said, "Ancient is closer." She hadn't expected Holiday Inn decor, but this was crazy.

She sat on the bed and heaved a sigh of relief to feel the give of an innerspring mattress. At least *that* was modern.

"Will that be all, miss?"

"I'd order some coffee, but it would take you hours to make the roundtrip," she told him.

"It's no trouble."

"No, never mind. A shower and some sleep are what I need most. Is the bathroom through there?"

"No, ma'am. That's a closet." When he hesitated, Ingrid grew apprehensive. "It's down the corridor a bit."

"Down the . . ." No way! She was not going to stay in a room where she'd have to trudge down the hall to a bathroom. She looked around for a telephone to call the desk clerk. No phone. Anger renewed her energy and Ingrid stormed out of the room and retraced the tortuous path back to the lobby while the bellboy followed. There was no one behind the desk. Ingrid's frustration mushroomed. She confronted the bellboy. "Just where *is*



everyone?"

He pointed toward an office door marked PRIVATE. "Mrs. Sweeney might be in with Mr. Clare."

Mrs. Sweeney must have been the motherly looking woman who had checked her in, Ingrid thought. Keeping her voice controlled and managing a smile, she asked, "Would you kindly see if Mrs. Sweeney is there and tell her I want to see her."

Before the bellhop could knock, the door opened and a tall shape filled the doorway. "Is there a problem, Miss Peterson?"

Ingrid was stunned. It couldn't be! But that black hair, those uncanny eyes, and that grin said otherwise. He was still in his work clothes.

"Won't you come into my office?" he invited. He had only partially unblocked the doorway, so she was forced to brush against him as she passed. Specks of turf clung to the front of his white turtleneck and she resisted the temptation to brush them away.

She looked around the room. His office was a large room with high ceilings, and dark, carved-wood wall panels. Two enormous windows sent streaming shafts of sunlight through the center of the room. The dark and light complemented each other.

"Please sit down, Miss Peterson." He indicated the highbacked mahogany chair upholstered in red leather. When she sat, instead of moving behind the massive wooden table that served as a desk, he pulled up another chair and sat close to her.

"How did you know my name?"

He leaned forward to say, "I looked at the register book as soon as I got back." His knees almost touched hers.

When Ingrid shifted a bit to the left, he smiled. Damn his insolence!

"I thought you were a farmer," she ac-

cused.

"I am. I've a few acres under cultivation. Not too much. Hay for the cattle and the horses I plan to buy. A small vegetable garden."

"You deliberately let me think that was all you were."

For a second, he frowned. "One thing is never *all* a man is, Ingrid." How quickly he moved to a first-name basis!

"You own this place."

"Castle Clare? So I do. I'm Liam Clare—Liam to you. I'm a farmer, and a hotel proprietor. And," he added suggestively, "many other things that I hope you'll get to know."

"You mean in the few days I'm here? Instant friendship?"

"Why not? Quantity's not as important as quality. Quality time—isn't that the latest buzz word back home? We could see to it that our short time together is quality time." Her sarcasm hadn't discouraged him. But did she really want to?

"Back home? Then you're American?" she asked.

"All the way."

"And the brogue? Is that a put-on?"

He laughed. "No, it's natural enough. Boston Irish, we call it! Some say Irish-American brogue's the worst there is... or the best. Depends on your point of view. I thought I'd lost it, but coming here always brings it back."

"Reaching for your ethnic roots," she said knowingly.

He frowned again. "I'm not much for analyzing things—myself included."

"I gathered that."

"That's what sociologists do, isn't it?"

"In a way. We study how societal groups function and what makes them behave as they do. Things like tradition, environmental factors, social mores, and taboos."

"Sounds deadly."

"Not at all," she said, bristling. "It's quite fascinating."

He shrugged. "I'd rather live life than study it."

"If you attend some of our lectures here, maybe you'll change your mind."

"Only if you let me argue my point of view." He smiled. "Maybe you'll change yours."

A possibility that had a certain attraction. But this was ridiculous. She wasn't here on vacation. It was true that she had scheduled a week's leave right after the conference, but that was to do research in Stockholm for a book she was writing.

This man had a strange facility for confusing her. With a flustered laugh, she admitted it. "You know, you've made me forget what it is I wanted."

"What do you want?"

He made the question sound so intimate! "I'd like my room changed." His reaction made her pause. "Are you laughing at me?"

"No." Still laughing, he shook his head. "At me. I'm trying to be romantic and you come up with that."

She was irritated. "It really isn't funny. That room is impossible. It's cold."

"A fire in the fireplace should help."

"There's no bathroom."

"It's down the hall. A bit inconvenient, I know..."

"Damned inconvenient! I didn't even bring slippers."

"Hmm, an unfortunate oversight."

"Not an oversight at all," she said indignantly. "Slippers aren't needed in modern hotel rooms that have wall-to-wall carpeting and private baths. That's what I expected here, what I was led to expect." Ingrid whipped open the brochure she had been clutching and read aloud: "Castle Clare combines Old World charm and modern luxury with its fifty modernly renovated rooms, all with private baths and..."

"Aha!" he interrupted. "Fifty rooms. That's the key."

"What?"

"There are *fifty-four* registrants at your conference. To accommodate all, we just had to put a few in the old wing. I hoped that the few of you assigned to the old wing would have a romantic nature," he said with a cajoling smile, "and would enjoy the charm of another era. There are just four of you. All women, so you don't have to worry about not having locks on the doors."

"No locks?" Ingrid started to laugh. "That fits. No bathroom, no locks, no telephone. The room doesn't even have a number."

"Is it a number you want?" he asked grandly. "You'll have it. Pick a number... any number."

"Zero. That seems appropriate."

"Then zero it is. I'll see to it myself." The telephone rang. He rose and went over to the table. "Excuse me," he said and picked up the phone.

"Yes, this is William Clare. Right. Put it through. Hennessy? How's it going...? That's all right. Have him call me direct and I'll lay it on him. Don't worry. What else? Oh, about that new route, I've been thinking the direct flight from Washington should use Dulles instead of National. Start checking it out."

There was authority, and hardly a trace of brogue, in his voice. Hennessy must be an employee. And Liam had identified himself as "William Clare." The name was vaguely familiar.

He'd hardly hung up when the phone rang again. Ingrid stood. "I'd better go."

"Please don't run off."

"You're busy."

"Nothing that can't wait." Ingrid was aghast to see him lift the phone up and replace it immediately, cutting the connection, and the insistent ring.

"How can you do that?" she asked.

"Easy. Modern conveniences can sometimes be damned inconvenient."

"I could never do that," she admitted. "Not knowing who called would bother me."

"Seeing you leave would bother me more." His wide smile was so ingratiating. Ingrid realized that all her involvements with men for the last few years had been based on shared interests, usually professional. Out of choice, on her part. She valued the companionship of people who understood her work. She had nothing in common with this... what was he? Farmer... hotel owner... businessman? All those—and more, or so he'd implied. And invited her to get to know him. A tempting invitation? His undisguised interest was flattering and the light conversation was fun—for a change.

Ingrid caught herself. *Better get out of here*, she thought, as Liam came toward her. *You're too tired to think straight*. She hurriedly opened the door. "I really should go."

"Do you always do what you should?" Her hand still clutched the doorknob, and when he covered it with his, a surging warmth shot through her.

"Always," she said, and pulled away.

"A pity," he said softly as she walked off.

When Ingrid opened the door to her room, she remembered what Liam had said. "The charm of another era..." Fifteen minutes ago she'd have traded this charm for a heated room with an adjoining bath and modern plumbing. Now she wasn't so sure. There might be something to be said for Irish charm.

---

As Ingrid moved barefoot down the corridor the next morning, the bathroom opened and a young woman with short, frizzy brown hair emerged. The blue, wraparound robe she wore was an exact duplicate of Ingrid's.

The woman grinned and pointed. "Did you get it at Filene's?"

Ingrid answered her smile. "No. Garfinckel's."

"You're from Washington, then."

"Right. And you're from Boston."

The woman nodded. "I'm Leslie Fein."

"Ingrid Peterson."

"Mrs. Sweeney mentioned that I had a next-door neighbor. I knocked on your door last night, but you must have been out."

"Out is right—like a light. I've been asleep since I got here, trying to make up for the jet-lag."

"What a waste!" Leslie exclaimed. "You'll have plenty of time to sleep during some of the seminars."

"That's irreverent," Ingrid said with a laugh.

"But true. Don't tell me you've never been bored at these things."

"I... well..."

"Aha! Got you. That's all right. It happens to all of us. Look, stop by after you take your bath. I've had mine. You're in for a treat."

"What kind of treat?"

"You'll see." Leslie skittered down the hall in her high-heeled slippers. At least she had slippers.

Ingrid was pleasantly surprised by the large bathroom. There were different alcoves for toilets, two mirrored sinks, a bath, and a separate stall shower. Sharing would not be that hard. The huge old-fashioned porcelain tub had clawed feet, and on a shelf above the brass spigots was a lush array of bubble baths, oils, and lotions.

At home, Ingrid habitually took a bracing shower. She hesitated, then succumbed to the lure of a long, hot soak. She was glad she did.

Afterward, feeling languid and relaxed, she headed back to her room. Leslie's

door was open and a delicious aroma wafted out. "Come on in," Leslie called. "I've got some coffee for us." Ingrid couldn't resist. Leslie, now dressed in a sprightly plaid shirtwaist, was sitting at a round table covered in fringed red velvet. In front of her was a coffee tray with two cups.

Leslie sniffed. "I see you opted for the jasmine bubble bath. I tried the musk bath oil, myself."

"Do you think we'll clash aromatically?"

"Nah. It wears off quickly. Sit and have some coffee."

"Thanks. How did you manage the coffee?"

"Room service."

"But there's no phone."

Leslie giggled. "I saw this guy outside. A handyman, or so I thought. I asked him to order some coffee for us. Guess who he was."

Ingrid didn't have to guess. "Liam Clare."

"How did you know?"

"Apparently he likes to play different roles. I took him for a farmer." Briefly, making light of it, Ingrid described her own encounter with Liam Clare.

"Isn't he something else!" Leslie said with admiration. "He's quite the local hero in Boston, you know."

"Now I remember why his name's familiar!" Ingrid said. "He owns Atlantic Air Ferry."

"That's the one. Didn't you come over on one of their flights?"

"No. I'm going to Stockholm from here, so my travel arrangements were kind of complicated."

"Vacation?"

"A working vacation. I have some research to do."

Leslie nodded. "I know. The social scientist's version of R and R—research and relaxation."

Ingrid laughed. "Exactly." It was true that she had never taken time off just to rest or relax. There was no clear division between her work and private life. She preferred it that way.

She put her cup down and stood. "Well, I guess I'd better get dressed for breakfast. I'll see you there."

As she approached her room, Ingrid spotted the large "O", a wreath about twenty inches in diameter, made of strawlike grasses into which were woven sprigs of heather. As she'd asked, Liam had given her room a number. It was utterly charming.

---

Ingrid hurried through breakfast, skipping most of the tempting buffet offerings except for two oatmeal-raisin buns and a cup of coffee. Outside the tall dining room windows, the morning mist was rising to meet the sunlight that would soon absorb it. She had put on a yellow sweat suit in anticipation of a long walk. This morning might be her only chance. The rest of the conferees were arriving, and there was the usual commotion at the reception desk and at the conference registration desk set up in the lounge. People were milling around, greeting old acquaintances; getting introduced, pinning on their name tags, discussing the conference activities. Who's publishing what? That was one of the main topics. Also popular was job opportunities, or the lack of them, in the field. Normally, Ingrid would have hung around, making herself useful to Dr. Gluck, who was chairman of the conference.

But today, uncharacteristically, she wanted to be outdoors for a while. Soon enough, her days would be spent running from one seminar or lecture to the next.

Outside, Ingrid took a deep breath. Hmm. What was coming through now was the freshness of the air. It had rained during the night, but the sun was out this

morning. Ingrid looked over at the tower. She hadn't seen Liam at breakfast. Was he up there, still asleep, in that tower of his? She headed in that direction, following a gravel path around the tower.

In back of the tower, she came upon a flower garden that almost assaulted her eyes with its profusion of colors. There were roses and marigolds, zinnias, impatiens, and flowers she couldn't name: red and gold and pink and orange and white—in a helter-skelter arrangement, a disordered loveliness in the morning sunlight. She couldn't resist the pebbled walkway through the center, carefully sidestepping the blooms that spilled onto it.

"Do you like my garden?"

She turned and faced a grinning Liam. "It looks as if someone just took handfuls of seeds and threw them around!"

"And let nature do the rest," he said with a laugh. "You're right! That's exactly how it happened."

"You did this?"

"Of course. The gardener wanted orderly little flower beds."

"Do you have something against order?" she asked.

"Tell me, do you like my garden?"

"Well." She had to admit it. "Yes, I do."

"Good. We have more in common than you want to admit, Ingrid Peterson."

"Nonsense." She turned and walked up the path towards the open moor. Liam followed close beside her.

They walked along silently. Finally, to break the silence, Ingrid asked, "What's that shrub growing all over the hills? The one with the yellow flowers?"

"Furze. Or gorse. It goes by both names."

"It's so pretty. How long does it bloom like that?"

"Forever. In fact, there's a saying around here: 'When is kissing out of

season? When the gorse is out of bloom.' Speaking of which..."

He turned her to face him, then slowly lowered his mouth to hers. It seemed so natural for him to kiss her at this moment, so natural for her to respond. Her senses flooded with the richness of him, his taste and smell and touch.

It was Liam who finally raised his lips and ended the kiss. He looked down at her, smiling gently. Then, hand in hand, they began to walk together, as if by silent agreement.

---

Later back at Castle Clare, Leslie wound her way to Ingrid and Liam through the people milling about in the reception area. "Ingrid, I wondered where you'd gone off to. But when I realized that both of you were missing, I knew you were in good hands." Leslie smiled her approval.

"I went for a walk. Did I miss much?"

"Nothing you haven't heard before," Leslie said. "But I wanted to tell you I made reservations for a group of us to go to Bunratty tonight."

"What's Bunratty?" Ingrid asked.

"Bunratty Castle," Liam answered. "They put on medieval banquets for the tourist trade. I've been meaning to get to one of their banquets to see how it's done."

"I'm glad you said that," Leslie said, "because I hoped you would join us."

"I'd be delighted," Liam said.

Mrs. Sweeney was signaling to him so he excused himself. Ingrid looked at her watch. "It's almost time for the first workshop. I'd better get changed."

"You look fine," Leslie told her.

"In a sweat suit?"

Leslie looked around. Almost every woman was wearing a suit or, as she herself had on, a skirt and tailored blouse. "I see what you mean," she said ruefully. "God, we look as if we're in uniform."



"Late Marriage—Early Divorce" was the topic of the first panel discussion. It should have been interesting, but it was mostly a tedious recitation of the latest statistical studies. One of the speakers, a gaunt, elderly woman, noted the effects of divorce on children, citing a statistical correlation of divorced parents with adolescent sexual promiscuity and teen-aged pregnancy. The woman's voice was coldly analytical as she itemized heart-breaking social and personal problems. Did the speaker feel an empathy that she just didn't project? Ingrid had an unpleasant thought. Did she, too, sound that way when she lectured?

Ingrid recalled Liam's accusation that sociologists studied people instead of enjoying them. One could do both, she thought defensively; there was nothing wrong with bringing some professional objectivity into personal relationships.

Ingrid's puritan righteousness sustained her through the rest of the afternoon's lectures. But, when they were over, she hurried to her room. It wasn't that a medieval castle banquet was more important than her work. It wasn't that at all.

Anticipation of being with Liam again? If that was it, she was in deep trouble.

Leslie knocked on her door after Ingrid came back from her shower. "Let's dress up tonight," Leslie said.

"Are we supposed to?"

"We're supposed to do what we want. Come on, Ingrid. No sedate conference uniform tonight. What've you got that's ravishingly sexy?"

"Nothing."

Leslie followed Ingrid over to the closet. "What about this?" Leslie pulled out a hanger. Ingrid had brought along an ankle-length green faille dress to wear to the one opera performance she meant to attend in Stockholm. It was very simply

cut with a deep V neck and long sleeves, shirred in a slight puff at the shoulders. "And I'll wear my red velvet. It doesn't make me look exactly sylphlike, but it's kind of medieval."

"Leslie, I don't know..."

"Come on. Get into the spirit. Pretend you're a twelfth-century princess and Liam's the titled nobleman who's just won your hand in a grueling jousting match."

"You have a very vivid imagination." Ingrid laughed.

"The green," Leslie said on her way out. "That's an order."

Why not? She might not even be able to get an opera ticket on short notice next week, and then she'd have packed this dress for nothing. Might as well get some use out of it. Ingrid fastened her hair behind her ears with two small, pearl-studded combs. She applied a touch of gold-tinted rose blush to her cheekbones, brushed her nose and chin with a powder puff, and then made up her eyes, blending tones of green and blue for an interesting eyeshadow, darkening her lashes with sable-brown and adding a few pencil strokes of chestnut to her tan eyebrows. Then she slipped into the green dress, liking the feel of it shimmering to her ankles. She couldn't zip the back all the way up, so she put on her high-heeled sandals, grabbed a small black envelope bag, and went next door.

"We look absolutely smashing," Leslie said with approval after she zipped up Ingrid's dress. Leslie's red velvet had a becoming scooped neck and fell in soft folds from a softly shirred waistline.

When they met the others in the lobby, Ingrid was glad to see that most of the women had changed into dresses. She was surprised that Dr. Gluck was part of the group. But where was Liam? Had he changed his mind?

Mrs. Sweeney had called for four taxi-

cabs, and when the first one arrived there was a flurry of confusion. Who should take the first cab? Who had the tickets or vouchers? How would they reassemble at Bunratty?

Then Liam appeared and immediately took charge. "Now, there's a man with quiet authority," Leslie whispered to Ingrid. "And he is gorgeous, besides."

Ingrid wouldn't have chosen Leslie's adjective, but Liam, simply dressed in a white shirt of a soft chamoislike fabric and black trousers, seemed to exude a special masculine magnetism tonight. The long full sleeves of his shirt and the thin gold chain around his neck suggested old-time gallantry. Soon, the others were all dispatched by cab and just the two of them were left. Ingrid had no inclination to question, or to protest, the arrangement.

Liam helped her into his sports car, and after he was beside her he leaned over to take her hand. "You look beautiful, like a medieval princess... or a Druid priestess." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the soft palm.

"Or whatever," she said, trying to cover with lightness the electrifying effect of his touch. "Leslie thought we should get into the spirit of things."

"I'm in wholehearted agreement." He released her hand and started the car. "And the spirit of an old-time Irish banquet is definitely rollicking. I take back that bit about the Druid priestess. That austere lady would not feel at home where we're going."

As they approached Bunratty, impressively lit by hidden spotlights, Liam said, "Try to block out that big parking lot and the tour bus pulling in. Pretend the lighting is just from moonlight..."

"There's a lot of wattage in that moonlight."

"Suspend disbelief, woman," he ordered as he parked the car and then

came around to help her out. "We are a lord and his lady invited by the Earl of Bunratty to an evening's pleasure of food and drink and music and... Who knows how the night will end?"

Ingrid couldn't ignore the delicious shiver of anticipation that his words aroused. *His Lady*... for tonight, that's what she would be.

When the whole group from Castle Clare had gathered, they were directed to climb the narrow spiral stone staircase to the first-floor reception hall. At the top of the stairs stood the costumed host and hostess with the traditional Irish brown bread of friendship that they offered to each guest.

"Milords and ladies, honored guests, please to follow me up to the dining room," the host proclaimed.

They climbed another staircase and entered a huge banquet hall with rows of long tables. The soft light of candles was reflected in the pewter pitchers and plates on each table.

When everyone was seated, costumed serving girls marched out with pitchers of claret and then went around tying bibs on everyone. That done, they came round with platters heaped with beef ribs, vegetables, and potatoes.

Ingrid saw that there were no utensils next to the pewter plates on the table. The waitresses served each guest and then placed the platters in the center of the table. Ingrid noticed that one particularly vivacious redhead exposed ample cleavage as she bent over to serve Liam and lingered longer than was necessary. Liam didn't mind a bit.

"How are we supposed to eat?" someone asked, looking helplessly at his plate.

"Just as they did centuries ago," Liam said. "With the hands that the good Lord gave us." It was as if he suddenly freed them from their constraints. By the time



the platters of barbecued chicken came around, everyone was eating heartily, if sloppily. Including Ingrid. It had been hours since lunch, and she was famished. Everything tasted delicious and she dipped often into the platters of ribs and chicken.

Their table duties done, the serving girls had repaired to a raised stage at the side of the banquet hall, and the Bunratty host announced a musical entertainment. Ingrid was surprised at the beauty of the voices and the skill of the three instrumentalists—on harp, flute, and guitar—who accompanied them. The selections ranged from bawdy to sad to wistful to romantic. Medieval or Renaissance? she heard someone ask. Why did it matter? It was lovely. It wasn't real, of course; she was part of this make-believe like an actor in a play. Since that was the case, couldn't she dispense with caution and the reservations that real life required? For a little while? Liam turned and smiled at her and her heart filled with joy.

Coffee and tea were served downstairs and soon the crowd started thinning out as people began to leave. "I almost didn't come," Ingrid told Liam. "I'm glad I did. It's been a lovely evening."

"Don't make that past tense," Liam told her. "It's not over yet."

---

"Even Dr. Gluck's coming," Leslie said. The others had gone ahead but Leslie waited for Ingrid and Liam by the small bridge. Leslie had persuaded the group to stop in at Durty Nellie's Pub before going back to the hotel. "How about it?" Leslie asked. Going to a noisy pub was not the way Ingrid preferred to top off the evening, but she didn't want to be the only dissenter.

"I guess so."

Ingrid was startled by Liam's firm contradiction. "I guess *not*, Leslie. We'll head on back. I've got some important

business tomorrow and I'll need a clear head."

"I understand... perfectly," Leslie assured them with an indulgent smile. "Catch you tomorrow." She hurried off.

Ingrid pulled away from Liam. "She probably knew you were lying."

"About having business tomorrow? That wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth. The truth is that I want to be alone with you. Would you rather join the others at Durty Nellie's?"

She sensed that he wouldn't fight her decision. A "yes" would end it—but she couldn't say the word.

Her silence was answer enough for Liam. "Good."

On the drive back, Ingrid chattered nervously for a few minutes, then stopped. Her mind was elsewhere. Liam said he wanted to be alone with her. That implied that he would not just see her to her room and say good-night. What, then? What would she say if he asked to come in? What did she *want* to say, or what *should* she say? Oh, Lord, she didn't even know what the proper question was, much less what to answer.

Of course, Liam could say something crass like "Your room or mine?" That would do it. Ingrid looked over at the strong lines of his profile, the sensitive curve of his mouth, and knew he wouldn't. He felt her eyes on him, turned, and smiled. The smile did her in. Her doubts melted in the warmth his smile engendered. In an instant, Liam had brought back the evening's magic. He must have sensed the change in her. He hummed softly and then started to sing one of the refrains they had heard that evening:

"O Mistress mine, where are you roaming?

O stay and hear your true love's coming  
That can sing both high and low..."

He broke off and pointed. "Look,

there's Castle Clare. I think it's more beautiful than Bunratty... and the moon makes quite a spotlight."

"You wouldn't be prejudiced, would you?"

"Blatantly. I love what's mine. And," he added huskily, "what I love, I make mine."

Ingrid felt herself enfolded within the romantic aura that Liam was creating around her... the sweet urgency of the song's message, Liam's own words, Castle Clare, and, most important, Liam himself. Or was her need filtering out all that would thwart it, all doubts and reservations? Liam pulled up at the front entrance.

"Suspend all disbelief," he had said earlier. For a while, Ingrid was willing to do so. She couldn't help herself. Liam came around and opened her door. He took her hand as they walked through the lobby, where a sleepy-eyed bell hop sat at the desk. She shivered when they reached the outside walkway and Liam put his arm around her.

"You're cold," he said, but Ingrid had no such sensation. "There should be a fire in your room."

There was. The arm around her propelled Ingrid toward the gently burning fire. Liam touched her chin and raised her face to his. Again she shivered, a delicate trembling that engaged every inch of her.

"Are you all right?" Liam's voice was a husky whisper.

"Yes," she said, and her parted lips invited his kiss. Liam held her lightly. His kiss, long and deeply questioning, sought a response that would free his passion. Ingrid raised tentative hands to his chest, feeling its muscular contours beneath the soft chamois of his shirt. It was when her lips caught fire, prodding his mouth, and she raised her hands to circle his neck and leaned up into him, that Liam had his answer.

"O Mistress mine," he murmured.

His lips again claimed what he now knew was his: the trembling hunger of her mouth, the silky skin of her cheeks. Ingrid abandoned herself to the myriad sensations that swarmed over her. Liam's hands moved caressingly down her back, molding her hips, pressing her to him. His lips distributed their heat and urgency over her face and throat, fastening on the pulsating hollow there.

When he raised his head, Liam's eyes were darkened whirlpools that caught her in their depths. "You're beautiful," he whispered. He took the combs out of her hair and let the silken strands run through his fingers. "My beautiful golden goddess." But a goddess would be impervious to the feelings swirling in Ingrid. They were the feelings, the needs, the passion—not of a goddess, but of a woman in love.

Liam took her face in his hands and kissed her with an even deeper urgency, summoning her own heightened response. Then his hands were on her back, lowering the zipper, slipping the dress from her shoulders and letting it fall. Ingrid stepped out of it. *It'll get wrinkled... I should hang it up*, Ingrid thought. But then all practicality dissolved under the intensity of Liam's gaze.

When Liam suddenly turned away, Ingrid couldn't control her soft cry of protest. He walked over to the bed and started to unbutton his shirt. Ingrid watched, mesmerized, as he undid the last button, removed the shirt, and tossed it on the foot of the bed. She could see the strong outline of his rib cage and the flat plain of his belly. Her breath caught as he loosened his belt, unzipped his pants, then removed them. He turned to her and held out his hands. "Come here," he said softly, and Ingrid moved into his arms.

Liam drew her close, his cheek against her hair. He held her quietly for a mo-

ment. Then his hands glided down her body, sliding the lace bikini panties over her hips. There was admiration in his eyes. "You're very beautiful," he said, his voice husky. Ingrid had always been self-conscious about her body. Her shoulders, she thought, were too broad, and her breasts too full. But here, naked under Liam's golden gaze, she felt beautiful—and completely natural.

Liam sat on the bed and pulled her beside him. As he kissed her, his body pressed her backward onto the bed and he began a sensuous exploration of her body. His fingers were changing instruments of delight, spanning her waist, stroking her slender flank, tracing a tantalizing path from her throat to her navel and then skipping lower. This most intimate caress started an inner writhing and Ingrid moved provocatively, sensually, under his touch. She sensed his pleasure at thus arousing her and marveled that it heightened his passion. Ingrid was acutely aware of herself and the effects of Liam's lovemaking, and yet also completely tuned in to him. She suddenly realized that she had not once closed her eyes. Formerly, she had thought of the act of love as a kind of anonymous pleasure to be cloaked in darkness. But love wasn't furtive, and the act of love was more than a sexual release.

Liam's mouth was following the forays his hands had made, and Ingrid found the touch of his lips and tongue even more tantalizing. Hesitatingly at first, Ingrid began to follow his example, seeking to reciprocate the same pleasure. She kissed his mouth, then trailed her lips to the cords of his neck, and tasted the hollowed center of his throat.

With easy strength, he lifted Ingrid and laid her back down lengthwise on the bed. For a moment, he hovered, looking down at her. "I knew it would be this way with us," he said. "From the minute I saw you,

I wanted to see you; all of you, like this." Ingrid felt her body misted in the emerald sheen of his eyes.

He seemed to be waiting for a signal, one she knew she had to give. Bereft without his touch, her body yearned toward him. When she stretched out her arms, seeking him, Liam, with a hoarse sound of pleasure, eased himself over her. With his lips against her ear, he said, "I want to love you, Ingrid. Completely...as you've never been loved before."

The words were not *I love you*. It was the act of love he meant. But before Ingrid's analytical mind could make something of this observation, Liam took her lips in a long kiss that blotted out all except her need for him. Her body moved beneath him, expressing that need, creating a heated friction that sent a shudder through Liam's body.

She relaxed into the eddying sensations that flooded her. Her arms reached to pull him against her, relishing the weight of his body. His head on her hair, Liam whispered incoherent messages. Love refrains? Was he acting out an Elizabethan song?

Liam moved more urgently now and Ingrid matched his ardor, absorbed his rhythm, and made them *hers*. There was no separation. When she looked into his eyes, she saw not a glazed frenzy, but a crystal elation that thrilled her. The wave again spiraled, rising...rising... She felt the force of the tidal wave breaking inside her. She clung to him helplessly, waiting for the eddies to subside.

Finally, Liam pulled her into the crook of his arm, her head in the hollow of his shoulder, their bodies touching, but sated now, and quiet. Ingrid smiled to herself, snuggled closer, and slept.



Ingrid awoke later when she felt Liam move. He got up and started to dress.

"I'd best get back to my apartment. For propriety's sake."

"Concerned about my reputation? You don't have to be."

He reached for his shirt. "Maybe I want to be." He grinned at her, and slipped out the door.

---

"Did you have a good time?"

"Did you have...?"

At breakfast the next morning, Ingrid and Leslie, almost in unison, greeted each other with the same question and started to laugh. Leslie regaled Ingrid with details of the Durty Nellie's contingent. Apparently Dr. Gluck had joined the sing-along in a heartbreaking version of "Danny Boy." Ingrid's response was much briefer, but Leslie didn't press her. "There's a glow about you that wasn't there before," Leslie said with annoying certainty. "That tells the whole story."

The whole story? Just what was that? Ingrid wished she knew what the plot was and how the story would end.

Ingrid's glow started to fade at midday when Liam still hadn't put in an appearance. She managed to wait until the end of the second afternoon session before succumbing and asking Mrs. Sweeney if Liam was in his office. "Oh, my!" Mrs. Sweeney exclaimed. "Did y' not get the note?"

Mrs. Sweeney turned and extracted a paper from one of the mailboxes behind her. "Here it is. I guess you didn't check your box today."

"I didn't expect any messages." Ingrid's fingers trembled slightly as she opened the folded paper. It was a page torn from a telephone message pad. Liam wrote in a bold, erratic scrawl that covered the page:

*Have to go to New York. Unexpected business.*

*See you when I get back.*

*Liam*

And that was it.

"Does Liam... Mr. Clare... do this kind of thing often?" Ingrid asked.

"You mean fly off to New York? Oh, yes. He takes care of a lot of business on the telephone, but every so often he takes off suddenly."

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

"He never does. It could be a week or just a day. He might even be back tonight."

But he wasn't. Nor the next day, nor the day after that. To Ingrid, the days seemed interminable. Now she checked her mailbox every time she passed through the lobby, but there was never anything there. Ingrid went to all the lectures, listened, and dutifully took notes. On a surface level, she was completely engaged. Beneath the surface, however, was an emotional stratum that had no connection with these activities. Ingrid tried to fill each moment to avoid dealing with her turbulent emotions: disappointment, resentment, anger, and anxious expectancy. Bitterly, Ingrid recalled that the last line of the little song with which Liam had accompanied his lovemaking was, "Love's a stuff will not endure." It was a line he had omitted. It wouldn't have suited his mood. It certainly suited Ingrid's now. When, on the morning of the last day of the conference, there had been no word from Liam, she felt only a cold emptiness.

During the lunch break, Leslie asked, "Any word from Liam?"

"Not to me."

"Has Mrs. Sweeney heard when he's coming back?"

"I haven't asked."

"Ingrid, don't pretend you don't care."

During the last few days, Ingrid had avoided talking about Liam. She sensed her friend's concern but gave Leslie no chance to express it.

"I'm not pretending," Ingrid said, "I choose not to care." She tried for a light tone, but the dry cynicism came through. "I see no reason to hang on to feelings that are counterproductive."

"Yuk!" Leslie grimaced. "Such a technical word—'counterproductive.' For something not technical at all. It's no good burying your feelings. They crop up again."

"Not if they die a natural death."

"That's even more dangerous." Leslie dropped her conversational tone. "Emptiness is worse than confused, even painful feelings. I know. When my husband Jake died, I mourned for a long time. I felt lonely, and resentful—and guilty for being resentful. So I denied *all* feeling, and concentrated on my work. But you know what happens, Ingrid? When your emotional life atrophies? It crumbles away. I saw it happening, and pulled out in time."

"There's no parallel. You lost the man you loved. All I've lost is..." Ingrid couldn't finish the sentence. How should she characterize Liam? Lover? Temporary lover? *Very* temporary lover? Suddenly the term "one-night stand" came to her mind, and Ingrid felt a flush of shame. Was that all it was? She had known Liam for such a short time. He was gay and whimsical and appealing, welcoming the joy of each moment. He'd made no protestations or promises. Cold reason argued that what had happened between them was no more than a single episode of making love. If she couldn't recall the bliss without the pain of its ending, better not to remember at all. "Let's drop the subject," Ingrid said.

Leslie looked at her searchingly, aware of Ingrid's unexpressed consternation. "Sure," she said, giving Ingrid's hand an affectionate squeeze.

"This banquet tonight's something I wouldn't mind skipping."

"I know," Leslie agreed. "More speeches. But Mrs. Sweeney says there's a fabulous menu tonight. And there's the drawing." The conference raffle raised money to defray the cost of the society's quarterly newsletters. "We might win something."

"I've never won anything in my life."

"Maybe this'll be a first."

Surprisingly, it was.

---

"Leslie, is this some joke?" Ingrid asked suspiciously. She had gone to the ladies' room while coffee was being served after the banquet. Now Leslie had followed and was insisting she hurry back.

"You won!" Leslie repeated with excitement.

Ingrid let herself be led outside and marched to the podium, where the beaming Mrs. Sweeney handed her an envelope.

"What does it say?" Leslie asked when Ingrid returned to the table.

The envelope contained a voucher stating that the bearer had a reserved place on the seven-day Ireland Adventure tour, all expenses paid, leaving September 11.

Ingrid handed Leslie the paper. "September 11? That's tomorrow. I'm supposed to leave for Stockholm tomorrow."

"So cancel," Leslie said. "You can get a refund on your flight."

"I've made my plans."

"Plans can be changed. Is the Stockholm research so important?"

Actually, it wasn't. Through her contacts, Ingrid could have the little information she still needed photocopied and forwarded to her in Washington. "No, but I'm not comfortable with last-minute changes."

"So be a little uncomfortable. Ingrid, loosen up. You've just had an unexpected prize thrown at you. Are you going to toss

it away?"

"The tour probably originates in Dublin," Ingrid said, weakening, but still pessimistic.

"If it does, I'll drive you there. Look, if you're not going to use this voucher, I'll be glad to." To illustrate, she held the envelope at arm's length from Ingrid.

Ingrid's Scandinavian practicality finally came to the fore. Why shouldn't she take advantage of this unexpected gift? It would mean saving the expenses of the Stockholm vacation. The only sum forfeited would be her first night's deposit on her hotel there. There was another consideration. She'd already decided that she wasn't happy with her chapter on Irish family life. This tour would give her the opportunity for some firsthand observations and insights. She might even decide to expand her chapter on Ireland. With this professional validation, Ingrid didn't have to feel guilty about a frivolous change in plans.

When Ingrid reached for the envelope, Leslie held it out of reach. "I'll even pay you," Leslie offered teasingly, "but only half of what it's worth, to punish you for your timidity."

"No, thanks." With a sudden gesture, Ingrid retrieved the envelope. "I changed my mind."

"Bully for you! That's the spirit, Ingrid. Go for it!"

Ingrid had to smile at Leslie's overreaction. "Don't make this into some kind of big deal. All I'm doing is modifying my vacation plans."

"It's a start."

"Of what?"

"Who knows?"

When she packed that night, however, Ingrid had no anticipation of starting something new. Despite herself, her mind kept returning to the past, to Liam in this room, holding her in his arms, and, ultimately, in this bed, making her his.

But that was ridiculous. She wasn't his. How could she love a man who lived his life as if responsibility didn't exist, and who was guided only by the pleasure principle? She wanted to believe that her decision to stay in Ireland had nothing to do with Liam, nothing to do with preserving something of him by contact with the country he so loved.

He had written, "See you when I get back." But he had lied. Oh, he was bound to come back, but she would be gone.

---

As Ingrid walked toward the tower, she glanced up at the window overlooking Liam's flower garden, but it was an empty dark rectangle. A semblance of pale yellow sun hadn't yet pierced the morning mist. The soft shrouding suited her mood. She came around the tower and saw a red Mercedes 450 SL.

It couldn't be.

There must be someone else with the same kind of red Mercedes. It couldn't be Liam.

But it was. He came out of the hotel and walked toward her. Ingrid felt an almost choking surge of joy.

"This is crazy," Ingrid said as Liam put her suitcase into his trunk.

"Why? Your great Irish Adventure is about to start," Liam declared.

"But what I won was a guided bus tour of Ireland."

"So you did," he agreed. "*This*"—he pointed to the Mercedes—"is your bus, milady, and I am your guide. You expected to be herded on a bus with forty other people. Instead, you have a private car and a private guide. Isn't that an improvement?"

"It depends..."—she was having difficulty concentrating on his words when the touch of his hand, his thumb caressing so distractingly, reminded her of other more intimate caresses—"...on what

else happens," she finished feebly.

"What else happens, my sweet Ingrid," Liam said softly, "depends entirely on you."

So she had nothing to fear. Right? Her mind answered yes. "But I would like an explanation," she managed to say firmly.

"Of course. But let's get started. While we've still got a *few* hours of daylight left."

"Well," Liam said cheerfully as he drove away from the castle, "we can go as far as Adare and stop. Or would you like to go straight through to Killarney?"

"What I would like, Liam Clare, is an explanation of how... how all this happened."

He turned to her with an ingratiating smile. "Isn't it enough that it did, and here we are?"

"Oh, no, you don't." Ingrid tried to keep in her voice the firmness that was seeping out of her will. "Here we are, how come?"

"What terrible grammar from an educated woman."

"As long as my meaning is clear."

"Ah, that it is," he said sadly. "The social scientist's need for facts."

"The whole special lottery was a contrivance, wasn't it? Cooked up with Mrs. Sweeney."

"Now, how else could I have kept you here until I got back? I thought of kidnapping."

She kept herself from smiling. "You could have just asked me."

"Would you have stayed?" She hesitated. "See! I didn't want to take the chance. My persuasive powers lose something by long distance."

Ingrid sat dumbfounded as he continued.

"Do you know that I thought of you all the time these last three days. From the minute I got on that plane to the States, I started thinking of getting back here to

you. When I got to New York and found out that my business would take three days, I realized you'd be gone by the time I got back. That's when I dreamed up the lottery."

"That first day?" She was amazed. "But you didn't even call me."

"Which enhances the surprise and the pleasure."

Remembering her disappointment at his silence, Ingrid wasn't sure she agreed. "How did you know it would work?"

His answer, without any bravado, surprised her. "Because it had to."

They were silent for a long time, during which Ingrid was slowly surrendering her misgivings. She believed Liam. She believed that he had missed her and wanted to be with her, that, for this moment, she was very important to him. Would he have convinced her without his unorthodox trick? If he had just called and told her to wait for him, would she have trusted him, trusted herself, and changed her plans? Or rationalized her way to Stockholm?

But Ingrid was now willing to admit that succumbing to the temptation of the raffle prize hadn't really been for practical reasons, as she had told herself. The attraction of Ireland was Liam's; its charm reminded her of him. Staying prolonged a kind of contact that she couldn't bring herself to relinquish entirely.

Now, here he was beside her, physically here, again exuding the magnetic force that she found so enticing, and captivating. So, she would be a willing captive for this one week.

"Look," Liam called suddenly, "there's a fairy ring."

He pulled up by the side of the road and Ingrid scanned the view. "All I see is a ring of trees in that field there."

"And nothing growing around it. All the other trees have died or been cut down, but the farmers don't dare cut



down a tree from a fairy ring."

"Why?"

"Because it would mean bad luck. Don't look so skeptical. Come on. Let's walk over."

When they reached the periphery, they stopped. "It's just a circle of trees," Ingrid said. She looked up at Liam. The lowering afternoon sun turned the windswept meadow grass a golden-green, and Liam's eyes reflected the same hue, but with a warmer depth. "There's no magic," she said.

He cupped her face in his hands. "I keep forgetting that you are a modern, enlightened, social scientist." It was a tender teasing, as was the warm touch of his hands. "I'll prove it to you. A controlled experiment."

Ingrid guessed his intent and her lips were receptive, but still, when he kissed her.

Liam raised his head, took her hand, and pulled her inside the ring of trees.

"What in the world..." Ingrid started to exclaim, but her words seemed strangely hushed within the green shadowed enclosure.

"Shh!" Liam whispered. "Don't alarm the spirits here." There was mischief in his eyes as he bent toward her, this time encircling her in his arms. An inner circle within the fairy ring, she thought whimsically before his lips took hers again. This time, she could not still the ardor of her lips. Liam's mouth tasted of sunlight and she sought its warmth eagerly. She heard faint whisperings from the leaves, and when Liam ended the kiss, his voice blended softly with the sounds.

"See what I mean? The second kiss was better."

"Was it?" she murmured.

"Maybe we'd better retest our hypothesis." Again Liam kissed her and his tenderness reached the depths of her being and lodged there... forever. Sud-

denly the thought frightened Ingrid, and she drew back, averting her face so Liam couldn't see the apprehension in her eyes. Letting him become a part of her wasn't something she had bargained for. She made her way outside to the open—where she could think properly. Liam caught up with her and took her hand.

"Convinced?" he asked as they walked back to the car.

"That hardly qualifies as a controlled experiment," Ingrid said, hoping her voice didn't suggest her inner shakiness. "Nothing happened that we didn't make happen."

"So?" He paused before opening her door. "We create our own magic? I think I like that explanation." Ingrid felt a warmth suffuse her face.

They had lunch at a small thatched-roof restaurant in the picturesque town of Adare. Liam kept up an easy flow of conversation, describing his childhood, asking countless questions about hers as an only child. "I can't imagine being an only child," he told her. "I'm one of seven. Didn't you feel deprived?"

"Of what?"

"Noisy family dinners, sibling rivalries, fights—all those good things."

Ingrid laughed. "I managed to survive without them. My father and I were very close. I miss him how that he's remarried. My mother died when I was four, and I don't really remember her." Now why had she said that? She never discussed these feelings with anyone. There was something about Liam that made her open up. By the time they finished, Ingrid felt as if she and Liam had known each other forever. Forever... *Watch that word*, she warned herself.

When Liam suggested that they stay over in Adare and drive to Killarney in the morning, Ingrid agreed. Wherever they stayed, the same question would arise. Then Liam surprised her when they stop-

ped at a country inn and he asked the proprietor for separate rooms. She had been trying to decide whether to object to sharing a room, and if so, how, in view of their having already spent a night together. And if not, how to react when they were alone. The last time, there had been no preplanning. Ingrid's thoughts were in turmoil. Then Liam said, "We'd like two rooms, please," and that was that.

A porter took their bags and, when the man opened the door to Ingrid's room, Liam stepped inside for a moment, looked around, and said, "This looks comfortable enough."

It was a pleasant, old-fashioned room, with lace curtains, and a flowered bedspread on the brass bed. A double bed. "It'll do fine," Ingrid said. They said good-night and after Ingrid closed the door, she leaned against it, listening. Judging from the porter's enthusiastic "Thank you," Liam must have given him a generous tip. Then the door to the adjoining room closed and the porter padded off.

Ingrid opened her suitcase. No need to unpack for one night. She took out her pajamas and her toiletries bag. She undressed and, uncharacteristically, dropped her clothes in a heap, then went into the bathroom. There was another door. To Liam's room? Where else? Ingrid tried the knob but it was locked from the other side. There was a hook on his side of the door, too. The porter hadn't mentioned a shared bath.

Ingrid adjusted the shower head and let the pulsating stream massage her body. She lowered the pressure while she lathered up with the sweet-smelling soap, rubbing it into her skin. She closed her eyes and imagined other hands, Liam's hands, performing the same sensuous task, and an anguished warmth writhed inside her. Almost angrily, she turned up the water pressure; the hot, pelting torrent

was almost painful.

Back in her room, Ingrid towed her hair until it was almost dry, then brushed it until it was a shimmering cascade of fine silk. She unfolded her pajamas and suddenly, with an impatient gesture, she dug into the bottom of her suitcase and pulled out a sea-green nightgown she had not yet worn. She took off her robe and slipped into it. From two thin straps, the filmy chiffon floated to her ankles. Somehow, she needed to feel feminine and desirable tonight, if only for herself. She pulled back the spread and climbed into bed.

---

Was she dreaming him? Ingrid had sensed his presence before opening her eyes, but since Liam's face had been filling her dreams, she wasn't sure he was real.

She sat up. "Liam?"

"Yes." The connecting door behind him was open.

"What time is it?"

"Ten."

She had slept less than an hour. His face looked strange in the dim light. Ingrid got out of bed and took several steps toward him. "Is something wrong? How long have you been standing there?"

"A minute...two...five. I don't know." His voice sounded strained.

"Is something wrong?" she repeated.

Liam's eyes swept over her. The light was behind her and Ingrid became aware of how much her diaphanous nightgown revealed. It was designed to beguile, not to conceal. Was that why she had worn it, expecting this...willing this? Liam's fiery gaze warmed her body, and desire started to build. Her blood quickened and her breasts thrust against the sea-green chiffon.

"How the hell can you expect me to keep to my good intentions when I see you like this?" The wry crooked smile, the attempt at lightness that didn't disguise the

appeal in his voice, the fiery passion in his eyes, the magnetic draw of his very presence—all were her undoing.

"I'm not sure I want you to," Ingrid said softly, and a moment later found herself gripped crushingly against him.

"Be sure, Ingrid," Liam said desperately, all lightness now abandoned. "Be sure, or stop me right now."

Ingrid could no more stop him or herself than she could stop breathing. She reached up and held his face, then pulled it close to inhale the pungent scent of his skin. She kissed him, pouring into his eager mouth her sigh, not of surrender, but of shared passion.

His deft fingers slid the straps from her shoulders and Ingrid released Liam just long enough to let the gown fall to the floor. She moved close again, delighting in the touch of his hands on her sensitive skin, the warm, insistent pressure of his fingers. But it wasn't enough. Ingrid pulled his shirt loose and slid her hands under to caress the smooth contours of his back. But that, too, wasn't enough and she tugged at the shirt. "This is in the way," she whispered.

"Care to do something about it?" Liam asked gruffly.

Undress him? Did he want proof of her complicity, instead of just compliance? No matter. The suggestion had an erotic attraction Ingrid had never before enjoyed. "I accept your invitation," she said with a soft laugh. Ingrid unbuttoned Liam's shirt and pulled it from him. She undid his belt, zipper, and lowered his tight-fitting jeans over his hips. "How about a little cooperation here?" she asked. She got it. In seconds, his jeans and briefs were piled on top of her discarded gown. When Liam drew her close, she gasped to feel the naked length of him. Liquid fire dissolved the strength of her limbs and she clung to him. Liam lifted her off her feet, pressing her to him, suck-

ing passion from her mouth. Holding her thus, he moved to the bed, where Ingrid gently disengaged herself. She put out the bedside lamp, took Liam's hand, and together they lay down, so starting their slow sensuous exploration, each of the other.

This time, it was Ingrid who prolonged the lovemaking. She didn't want to be caught helplessly in an onslaught of sensations, but to relish each one separately. Liam's hands and lips and tongue again covered the territory they had once before claimed, but Ingrid gave herself the freedom to guide his touch, revealing where and how she was most aroused.

Ingrid tried to give Liam the same pleasure. Gradually, she grew bolder in her forays, marveling at the intricacies of his body and its vibrant responses to her touch. Her own body was both receptacle and instrument of pleasure. Ingrid caressed not just with fingers and lips, but with her whole being.

"What are you doing to me?" Liam's words were both anguished and triumphant.

There was wonder and joy in her answer. "I'm making love to you."

Liam, eyes blazing with his passion, matched her ardor, encouraging her frenzy, watching with blazing eyes as Ingrid reached and reached and reached, and when he gave her what she sought, he achieved his own shattering triumph.

Afterward, as Liam slept, Ingrid realized that something wonderful and unique had occurred. She had made love to Liam, not just accepted his lovemaking. Liam had unearthed a well of passion that had been long buried, and Ingrid had freed it in a torrent of desire. She felt profoundly changed, and somewhat frightened.

She looked at Liam, his black hair curling on his forehead, his face boyishly relaxed in sleep, and knew she loved

him—completely, deeply, unalterably. Rationally, she knew her love was inappropriate. Their personalities, values, and lifestyles were not only different; they were at opposite extremes. Liam wanted her, but had never said he loved her, perhaps because he recognized—and accepted—the impermanence of what they had. That damned adaptability of his! At the moment, she envied it. At the moment, there was nothing else she could do but try to copy it.

Ingrid sighed and, as if he sensed something in his sleep, Liam shifted closer and put his arm protectively around her. Ingrid burrowed into his warmth. Maybe she was exaggerating the differences between them.

They didn't get to Killarney the next day, nor the one after that. Instead, Ingrid discovered, Liam always thought of someplace "on the way" that she just had to see.

"Don't you ever go anywhere in a straight line?" she asked him laughingly as he took yet another detour.

"Not if it's more fun to go the round about way," Liam replied. "That's something you'll have to learn—to put away that 'scientist' in you and just go by your instincts."

And he could be right, Ingrid decided. She loved seeing Ireland Liam's way: walking hand-in-hand over windswept Innismore, picnicking on the sandy beaches, or riding horseback over the heathered moor.

Still, it troubled her that he entirely disregarded such a large part of her. The 'scientist' side, as he called it.

But she managed to take pleasure in the moment, and those days were the most wonderful she had ever known.

After lunch in Killarney on the fourth day of the trip, Liam announced that their next stop would be in Dublin. "That's a wonderful city. And I have someone

special for you to meet there."



Ingrid was surprised when, instead of going to a hotel in Dublin, Liam stopped in front of a small town house on a tree-lined street. The door was painted a bright blue and was crowned by a pretty fan-shaped transom. In a lace-draped window was a discreet sign: GUESTS.

She was further surprised when Liam enveloped in a bear hug the plump, frizzy-haired woman who answered his knock. Keeping his arm around the older woman, he reached for Ingrid's hand and drew her toward him. "Ingrid, meet Hazel Clare." The two women exchanged smiles and hellos. "Hazel's a kind of aunt, or a cousin, or something," Liam explained. "She had the good fortune to marry my father's cousin."

"I'd say the luck was on Joseph's side," Hazel told him.

"I figured you would. Where is Joseph?"

"It's September, so where do you think he is?"

"Right. I forgot. Joseph owns a gift shop in town," Liam explained to Ingrid, "and he goes to the States on a buying trip every September. Hazel goes in the spring."

"Someone has to take care of things here," Hazel said. "September's always busy."

"Don't tell me you don't have a room for us," Liam said.

"Thanks for giving me some advance notice," she said with hearty sarcasm. "I should make you sleep in your car." But it was a threat that had no real substance. Hazel led them into a large side room primly furnished with two Victorian-style couches and several wing chairs.

"You wouldn't do that," Liam told her.

"If you were alone, I would, wise guy."

"Then I'm glad I had the good sense to bring Ingrid with me." He put a proprietary arm around Ingrid. "In fact, it's such a good idea that we're going to make it permanent."

Hazel beamed. Ingrid stiffened. "Liam's jumping the gun," Ingrid told her.

"What else is new?" Hazel said dryly. "Just like all the Clares. I met Joseph Clare at a graduation party in New York in 1962, and three weeks later we were married and on a plane to Ireland."

Liam grinned. "Hazel reversed the usual immigrant flow."

"I thought your accent was more New York than Dublin," Ingrid said.

"The Bronx," Hazel told her. "Pelham Parkway."

"You can take the woman out of the Bronx, but you can't take the Bronx. . . ."

Hazel wouldn't let him finish. "Don't knock it. I have to work hard not to lose my accent," she told Ingrid. "Not like this one here who seems to develop a brogue whenever he comes over. My kids were born here, but Liam sounds more Irish than they do."

"How many children do you have?"

"Four. All boys."

"Ingrid and I are going to have seven," Liam said.

"We are not," Ingrid countered sharply. She felt a kind of frustration, as if she were being hurtled toward a destination she hadn't chosen. Liam was presuming too much. Talking about getting married and having children—such serious subjects—in such a haphazard way!

But Ingrid believed that marriage was an endangered institution in urban life. That's why many couples lived together first, to test their compatibility. Others drew up marriage contracts to protect themselves, both in the marriage and in case of a split-up. Most people who got married really thought they loved each

other; yet the divorce rate continued to soar. Which only proved that love wasn't enough.



That night, it seemed to be. Their lovemaking was joyous and prolonged. Liam was rollicking, then tender, then demanding. His passion seemed to have an infinite number of expressions and drew from her a variety of responses she hadn't realized were in her. Coaxing, brazen, teasing, submissive, Ingrid allowed her natural urges free play. Afterward, she wondered that their pleasure in each other seemed to grow each time they came together. Perhaps this kind of love was enough, Ingrid thought desperately.

At breakfast in the dining room, overlooking a tiny back garden, Hazel introduced them to the nine other guests as "my nephew and his fiancée." Ingrid did not object.

Afterward, Liam took her on a brief tour of Dublin. "It's interesting, but not really a pretty city," was Ingrid's verdict when they stopped for lunch at Mulligan's, a pub on Poolbeg Street.

"What do you mean—not pretty? With the River Liffey running through the center, and all those bridges."

"Some of those bridges aren't very picturesque."

"Is it picturesque you want? How about the Custom House?"

With its columned facade and Grecian portico reflected in the river, Ingrid had to concede that it was a grand building. "Don't be offended," Ingrid teased Liam. "I like Dublin, but it has a masculine charm, not like the feminine graciousness of some capital cities."

"Do you have anything against masculine charm?" he asked belligerently.

"Would I be here with you if I did?"

Liam's brows arched quizzically. "Sometimes I wonder," he said, surprising her. Could it be that Liam understood

her qualms?

"Liam..." she started, but he interrupted abruptly.

"We'd better get going."

So much for that, she thought with resignation. If he understood, he wouldn't avoid talking about it.

Liam was pleased by Ingrid's admiration of Trinity College, but when Ingrid mentioned that she would like to squeeze in a few hours of research at the library there before returning to the States, he frowned. "Why spoil things?" he asked.

"Spoil? What am I spoiling?"

"Our time together."

"How's that?"

"Burying yourself in studies and statistics is not my idea of fun."

"I don't expect you to join me. I like that kind of work, but you don't have to."

"I don't like being excluded from anything you do."

Suddenly, she got angry. She wasn't his clone. "Well, that's just too bad, isn't it?"

Liam shook his head with exasperation. "See? It's starting already."

"What's starting?"

"Look... I love you."

"So you say."

It was obvious he didn't like her response. "We've something very special together, don't we?"

There was no way she could deny it, but to be completely truthful, she would have had to add the words "for now." All she said, however, was, "Yes, but what does that have to do with my getting some work done?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'm afraid you'll carry over the kind of thinking your work requires into your personal life—into *our* lives. I've seen good things spoiled by overanalyzing."

"That's nonsense."

"It's not," he protested. "In college, I

discovered Thomas Hardy, and loved his poetry. Then an English professor made us pull apart and explain every line. Ruined the poetry for me."

Suddenly, a cold calm came over Ingrid. "If something's good, it can't be ruined that way, Liam. It would survive analysis, even be strengthened. Hardy's lines didn't change. *You* did."

Liam frowned, but didn't argue.

---

When they returned to Aunt Hazel's that afternoon, Liam called Castle Clare to check on how things were going. He learned that there had been an accident and a contractor doing renovation work had been hurt. "I'm on my way," Liam told the distraught Mrs. Sweeney. "I'll be there by seven."

Ingrid declined to go with him. She suddenly realized that this gave her an opportunity she hadn't expected; she had to take advantage of Liam's absence. "I don't think I could take another long drive," she said, feeling a twinge of guilt at lying. "Besides, you'll have your hands full without me."

"I'd rather have them full with you," he said, taking her face between his hands to emphasize his point.

"It's not a pleasure trip you'll be on," Ingrid reminded him gently, trying to still the inner trembling his touch always aroused.

"With you along, it could be," he said, and when he kissed her, his lips were warm with promise.

Why did he have to be so damned appealing? All her senses clamored to say yes, but she stuck to her resolve. Liam finally agreed.

"All right, then. You can get all your precious research done while I'm gone. I'll be back in time for dinner. We'll go out and celebrate."

"Celebrate what? The end of my Irish Adventure?" she asked lightly.

"How about the beginning of something better?"

"I'm going home the day after tomorrow."

He kissed her again. "That remains to be seen."

When he was gone, Ingrid knew she had to leave before he returned, or she might not be able to. Liam would do all he could to postpone, or even cancel, her flight home. When he was with her, Liam enclosed her with his presence, filling her senses, capturing her in his magnetism, invoking in her a passion that inhibited her from thinking logically. Could she spend her life with a man who had such an effect on her? But, having known him, could she endure without his love?

She would find out.

When Ingrid called the airline, she found out that she could get on a flight leaving Dublin for New York at midnight, just six hours from now. "Great," she said resolutely. "I'll take it." So why did she feel anything but great when she hung up? Ingrid turned from the hall telephone and saw Hazel standing there.

"You're leaving?" Hazel asked.

Ingrid nodded.

"Before Liam gets back?"

Ingrid nodded again, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"Yes."

"You're running away."

"I have to." Ingrid hurried up to her room. How could she explain the need she felt to get away? Here in Ireland, it was as if she were imprisoned in a fairy ring—like that ring of trees Liam had shown her. That magic circle within which he'd said the laws of reality didn't work. It was here, in the magic circle that Liam built around them, that she and Liam had loved each other. But the real world for In-

grid was back home, the scholarly, practical, ordered world she'd created for herself. Without magic, perhaps, but with the comfort of predictability.

Her apartment looked so different. Ingrid had always thought of it as the perfect place to live, within walking distance of the Kennedy Center and the Metro, a ten-minute ride to her office, close to George Washington University, where she had special library privileges, and not far from the Georgetown shops and restaurants. Mentally, she enumerated all these advantages as she walked through the tiled lobby whose mirrored columns reflected her tired image. She was trying to counter the dull depression that swaddled her mind and stifled her heart.

She got into the elevator and pressed the button for the fourteenth floor. It was really the thirteenth, but people appreciated the builder's concession to their superstitious fears of the number thirteen. People believed what they wanted to believe. Wasn't that something Liam had said to her? Ingrid didn't want to think of him now—not yet, anyway. She wanted to give herself a chance to get into her old routine, experience its familiar satisfactions. She walked down the long carpeted corridor to apartment 1422. She remembered the garland Liam had hung on her door in Castle Clare to give her a room number. Why couldn't she stop thinking of him, even here, in this place with which he had no association?

Ingrid unlocked her door, went inside, set down her suitcase, and looked around with a sinking feeling. She had always been satisfied with this apartment, with the sharp, bright look of lacquer and chrome, and the functional leather furniture. Why should it dismay her now? It looked like what it was—an efficiency apartment. And since she prized efficien-



cy, what was wrong with that? She was just tired, she told herself. But the following day, her apartment still looked orderly and cold and . . . empty. She went to work a day earlier than she was expected.

"There's a guy been calling," the department secretary told Ingrid when she got back from lunch. "He says he's in Ireland. He's got a darling brogue. . . ."

"Did . . . did he leave a message?"

"Just that he'd call later."

"Thanks, Ginny." Ignoring the secretary's obvious curiosity, Ingrid went into her office and closed the door. She went back to work, tackling the pile of folders on her desk—that is, she *tried* to go back to work. Evaluating the grant proposals required concentration, but every time her phone rang, her thought processes got jangled. It was always someone other than Liam. Not that she wanted to talk to him. She had nothing to say to him yet. She should be relieved that he didn't call again. But each time the phone rang, she felt an inner tension as she picked up the receiver.

Finally, just as she was ready to go home, it rang again. "Ingrid?"

Her heart stopped, then thudded riotously. "Yes."

"Why the hell did you leave like that?" The sound of his voice—even furious as it was—was so welcome.

"I had to."

"You could have waited until I got back."

"If I had, I might never have left."

"Damned right. I wouldn't have let you go. So what's the point?"

"Liam, I need time, time to think."

"What's there to think of?" Anguish was crowding out his anger. "Ingrid, I love you."

"That doesn't say it all," she said desperately.

"For me it does. I thought you loved me."

"I did . . . maybe I do . . . but I had to get away to find out."

"I don't believe this. What're you going to do, measure love with a slide rule, check its potency against some generalized formula?"

"That's ridiculous, and so's your conception of the work I do. Which is part of the trouble."

"What trouble?"

"The fact that you won't acknowledge our differences makes it worse."

"So we're different. There—I acknowledge it. *Vive la difference!*"

"I'm trying to be serious."

His voice changed. "Ingrid, listen to me; I've never been more serious. I love you. When I got back here and found you'd gone, it really hit me. You're the most important thing in my life. I've never felt more lonely than I do right now. I'm taking the next flight out of here—even if it's not on my airline."

She had to smile, but then steeled herself to say, "Liam, don't. That would negate what I'm trying to do."

"We did pretty well last week, didn't we?"

"In *your* world."

"You fit in completely."

"But I don't want to fit myself into your conception!"

"So I'll fit myself into yours."

"I don't want that either."

He raised his voice. "What the hell do you want?"

"I'm trying to find out!"

"You're yelling into the receiver."

"Sorry. You started it."

"Okay, we'll play it your way." He sounded unhappy, but resigned. "Do your thinking. I can wait. I think I can wait. I'll *try* to be patient. Dammit all, Ingrid! I love you. Remember that."

---

For a week, there was no word from Liam, and Ingrid told herself she ap-

preciated his cooperation. She didn't want to admit she was disappointed that he didn't call again. He was giving her the time she had requested, but the constructive thought processes she'd promised herself eluded her.

Ingrid's mind was filled with flashing images of their time together, memories of his voice, his laughter, his touch. She remembered her first impression of the man she had taken to be a brazen farmer, and her surprise at meeting him again as the charming, and disarming, owner of Castle Clare. There seemed to be an inner screen on which her memory kept projecting his image: Liam on horseback... or singing to her on the way home from Bunratty Castle... or kissing her in the emerald circle of the fairy ring of trees... or walking with her on windswept Inishmore.

Ingrid had told Liam she wanted time to *think things through*. Such a vague, useless phrase. There were so many "things." She could define them, even make a list, but what would be the point? Would they ever be completely thought through? Did they need to be? *Through* implied finished, but life was an evolving process and "things" changed. The primary issue was whether Ingrid could reconcile her love for Liam with her need to be her own person. And was that person the one Liam loved, or had he fallen in love with a romantic heroine of his own creation?

The next day, the notes started coming. The first said only: "I miss you desperately." It had a sprig of heather pressed into the fold. Ingrid inhaled its fragrance and a tide of longing swept through her. The following day, a second note made her smile:

"We don't have to have seven kids. Six? Maybe five? All right—you decide."

Then on the third day he sent her lines

from a Shakespearean song he once sang to her:

"O Mistress mine, where you roam-  
ing?

O stay and hear! your true love's  
coming

That can sing both high and low."

He'd added a postscript: "In delay  
there lies no plenty..."

There was nothing else, just Liam's  
scrawled signature.

She fumbled with the letter as she rode  
up in the elevator. Did this mean he was  
coming?... it *had* to.

It did! She opened the door to her  
apartment and—unbelievably—Liam  
was there. How...when...? Then joy  
drowned all her questions in its sweeping  
surge as Liam rushed to take her in his  
arms. He held her close and all she could  
do was whisper his name, over and over  
again. No longer a memory, no longer a  
signature scrawled on a note... Liam was  
here, really here, where she could feel his  
strength, inhale his fresh, spicy fragrance,  
look into the emerald brilliance of his  
eyes...



They barely spoke at first. It was almost  
as if each feared that words might mar  
their contentment. They laughed about  
how Liam had convinced the building  
manager to let him into Ingrid's apart-  
ment. "Coaxing and bribery—a potent  
combination," he'd joked. After a while,  
they prepared a light supper, both of them  
working together in Ingrid's tiny kitchen.  
"We'll need a bigger kitchen than this if  
we're going to be a gourmet cooking  
team," Liam said when they were clean-  
ing up afterward. "When we get married,  
that is." He looked at her intently,  
waiting.

Ingrid hesitated for only a few seconds,  
then said, very seriously, "I guess we  
will."

With those four words, their apprehen-

sions seemed to vanish. Finally, the important words came. They sat on the black leather couch and, with Liam's arms comfortably around her, Ingrid was able to describe the doubts that had plagued her.

"If I made you doubt how I love you, I gave off the wrong signals," Liam said when she'd finished. "I saw something in you from the first, something gay and whimsical and passionate. It was a part of you that you kept buried, but it was there, in you, not just a reflection of me. I wanted to bring it out."

"You did, but I couldn't help feeling you were rejecting another side of me."

"Ingrid, I realized something these last few days. I realized that the woman I fell in love with can be gay and romantic, and can also be scholarly and rational and analytic. I don't want to sacrifice either part of yourself. I want both. I want *you*."

"I thought you hated my work."

"I've seen people use so-called objective analysis to show why things turn out badly, or to prophesy that they *will* turn

out badly. I guess I associate that kind of thing with a negative approach to life. That's what I hate."

He had a point. "But it's not always like that," Ingrid said.

"You'll have to show me."

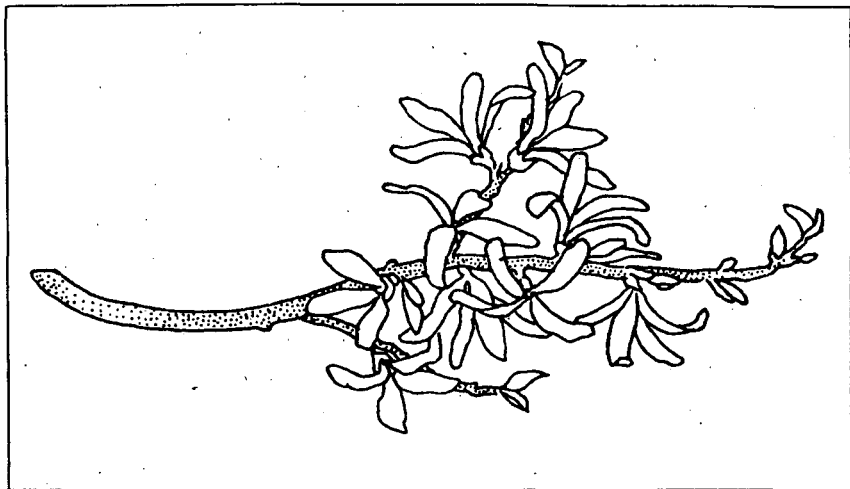
"I intend to," she promised. It was strange how confident she felt about their future together. This, then, was what love meant. Not only passion but respect and trust.

When Liam twisted her around to face him, desire danced in his green eyes, and anticipation of its fulfillment curved his mouth. There was such love and longing in his gaze; deep inside herself, Ingrid felt a small icy knot melt and unravel. "Journeys end in lovers' meeting," he whispered.

"Is that another quote from Shakespeare?" she asked breathlessly.

"Who the hell cares?"

Ingrid didn't. She cared only that Liam kissed her, and in that touch of their lips, their love and passion and trust met and mingled and fused. Forever. ♥





# *Kid at Heart*

---

*Where Lisa Fleming goes, chaos follows—as toy company owner Chase Sanger quickly learns when he hires her to design a new line of playthings. Suddenly he's bombarded by mechanical marvels and the unaccountably exciting prospect of fooling around with precocious Lisa!*

---

—AIMEE DUVALL—

---

**H**idden behind the one-way glass in the McIver exhibit's control booth, Lisa Fleming could study the crowd of businessmen without being seen. Gleeefully, she scanned the group for suitable targets of Randy the Robot's next demonstration. Having headed the design team that had created Randy, she was eager to show the world—or at least the people attending the toy fair—exactly what stupendous feats Randy was capable of performing.

People were charmed by Randy's ability to speak. It made him seem even more human, although his voice in reality was only a synthesized version of Lisa's own.

As she looked around, Lisa's attention was captured by a tall, well-dressed man who had just entered the exhibit area. Singularly impressive, he walked with the confidence of a man accustomed to exercising power and being surrounded by wealth. He was picking up a brochure

From KID AT HEART by Aimee Duvall. Copyright © 1986 by Aimee Duvall. Published by arrangement with The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

describing her company's new line when two McIver executives approached him. The newcomer smiled and shook hands with both men.

Lisa directed Randy to serve hors d'oeuvres to the prospective customers, all the while studying McIver's visitor. His black hair held traces of silver around the temples, a look she found distinguished and mature. He appeared to be in his late thirties, but the hint of hardness that edged his face suggested he was older, or perhaps well acquainted with the harsh realities of life.

She noted his green tag, which meant he was with one of the companies displaying toys in the exhibition hall's main showroom. In the space where others had written their names, his tag was blank. No help there.

What a puzzle he was! Feeling delightfully wicked, she lowered her gaze. Suddenly her attention was caught. Was there some lettering on the silver and turquoise belt buckle he was wearing? She picked up the opera glasses she had borrowed for the occasion and held them to her eyes for a closer look.

With a triumphant smile, she pressed the remote control button that activated Randy and maneuvered the three-foot-tall robot toward the man. "Hi! My name's Randy. You must be with Sanger Toys," the robot said as Lisa spoke through her microphone.

"And how would you know that, my little friend?" the stranger asked with a grin.

Lisa watched his expression soften and silently approved of the change. "Your belt buckle says 'Utah,' and you're wearing a green tag, which means you're with one of the exhibitors. There's only one toy company based in Utah, and that's Sanger."

The man chuckled. "That's pretty good."

Lisa recognized John Nielson, the vice president of corporate affairs at McIver, as he stepped behind Randy and placed a hand on top of the robot's head. "This is Randy, Chase. Lisa Fleming and her team in research and development designed him. He's one of the first voice-recognition robots on the market."

Chase. So, their guest was none other than the owner of Sanger Toys, Incorporated, Chase Sanger. Lisa had heard about his company, of course. The mainstays of Sanger, which specialized in play items traditionally selected by boys, were sturdy wooden boats and cars, and construction equipment made of plastic and metal. But during the past few years, Sanger, with its line of conventional toys, had begun to lose its share of the market. Rumor had it that the company's emphasis on traditional, durable toys was about to undergo some major changes.

"Randy," John Nielson said, "why don't you you go get Mr. Sanger some refreshments?"

"Coming right up," Lisa answered as Nielson began to explain the robot's capabilities to Chase.

Lisa depressed the button that instructed Randy to avoid objects in his path, then guided the robot toward a table where cans of soft drinks had been set out.

Once Randy had served Chase, Lisa relaxed. It was time for a break. But just then, through Randy's audio sensors, she heard John Nielson inviting Chase Sanger into her booth. Seconds later both men appeared in the doorway of the control booth.

"Chase Sanger, this is Lisa Fleming," John said.

Lisa was completely unprepared for the impact of Chase Sanger's steady gaze. Her pulse leaped to life, and she felt as self-conscious as a teenager meeting her first date. "Hello," she greeted in a barely

audible voice.

"Pleasure to meet you," Chase drawled. His voice was rich and mellow, like a dark, heady wine.

"Chase is an old friend of mine, Lisa," John explained. "He's got a degree in engineering, so I'm afraid his questions are way over my head. I thought you could explain Randy's voice-recognition capabilities to him. I've got to meet a client in five minutes, so I'll leave you two to get acquainted. But be careful how much you tell him," John teased. "Chase may be a charming and persuasive bachelor, but he's still our competition." After giving Chase a pat on the back, he left the booth.

Suddenly the control booth seemed incredibly small. Lisa avoided looking into Chase's eyes. "The voice-recognition components," she said briskly, "work a great deal like a telephone answering machine programmed to know your voice when you call in and ask for your messages."

"That's what I suspected," Chase said. "What really impressed me, though, was the way you used the remote microphone to talk to people. Everyone's commenting on how observant you are and what a great private investigator you'd make. That's quite a talent."

"It's a hobby of mine," she said. "I like to watch people. That's how I usually get my toy ideas. To me, toys are people in caricature."

"Well, you're certainly a successful designer. Your People Pieces have been best-sellers since they came out last season. That invention earned a place for your name in all the trade publications."

"I think the People Pieces are my best work to date," she agreed. "I created them after watching the daughter of a friend of mine playing. She wanted to see what her doll would look like with black

instead of blond hair, so she poured shoe polish over the doll's head." Lisa laughed. "That's when I thought of selling interchangeable parts. Kids can buy new arms, heads, and so forth and create their own—"

The sound of chairs toppling over and loud, angry voices made her stop short. "What's going on?"

Chase stepped to the window and glanced out at the display area. "Good Lord, Randy's going crazy! Did you accidentally activate him?"

"Of course not." Lisa picked up the remote control device and pressed the off button just to make sure. "It's not on."

"Well, Randy sure *is* on," Chase exclaimed, "and you'd better turn him off quick, because he's heading out of the McIver exhibit area."

"I can't turn him off!" Lisa hit the remote control against her hand. "I'm telling you, I haven't switched him on!"

The tinkling sound of shattering glass reached Lisa as she arrived at the window—just in time to see Randy rotate wildly about and careen past the fragments of a broken water pitcher. Without hesitating, Lisa dashed out of the booth, remote control in hand.

"Do something," a salesman yelled at them. "He's running around in circles, destroying everything in his path!"

Aghast, Lisa watched Randy whirl through the entrance of their display station and scoot out into the main showroom.

"Let's go," Chase said, grabbing her arm.

They hurried across the main aisle of the exhibition hall. Traveling in an ever widening circular route, Randy was picking up speed—and heading directly toward a tremendous building blocks display prepared by Prescott Toys!

"If he hits that, it's going to look like Godzilla attacking downtown Tokyo!"

Lisa wailed.

Chase increased his pace. "Head him off while I try to locate the source of interference."

She sidestepped curious onlookers and broke into a run. Then, reaching her target and throwing caution to the wind, she made a flying leap straight at Randy, struggling for a hold. With the agility of a professional athlete, Randy turned abruptly and headed in the opposite direction, leaving Lisa clutching air.

With a groan, Lisa scrambled to her feet and resumed her pursuit. A moment before Randy collided with a printing set display, she leaped forward again in a desperate tackle. Instantly locking her arms around the middle of Randy's egg-shaped frame, she yanked him off the showroom floor.

Frantically she searched for Chase, fighting her still struggling captive, whose wheeled feet whirled loudly as his mechanical arms swung up and down like hammers.

Finally she spotted Chase, several exhibits away, dashing toward a display of tiny radio-controlled cars racing around a portable track. He grabbed a manual control device from a sales executive's hand and manipulated the switches. Instantly, miraculously, Randy became still in Lisa's arms.

She sighed with relief and set the robot down, smiling gratefully as Chase rushed up to her. "I don't know how you managed to figure it out so quickly," she exclaimed, "but I'm buying you the best dinner in town!"

"Great!" Chase insisted on carrying the robot back to the McIver booth. "I explained the problem to the people demonstrating the radio-controlled cars, and they promised not to use that frequency anymore. But I don't think you'd better put Randy back on the floor today. He might make these folks extremely

uneasy." He gave her a rakish grin.

As they neared the McIver exhibit, John Nielson came rushing toward them. "Don't bring Randy back in here, Lisa. Hide him for a while, will you? Steve Holberg is ready to have him executed." He lowered his voice. "We could be sued if anyone sustained extensive damage. Hell, we could be sued anyway!"

Steve Holberg, McIver's president, had acquired a reputation for his volatile temper. Lisa winced. "John, I hope he's not blaming me. It wasn't my fault. I was just—"

"Your company probably isn't liable," Chase broke in quietly. "One of the radio-controlled cars from Trayco, Incorporated, happened to be on the same frequency as your robot. Their exhibition model malfunctioned, so they replaced the remote at the last minute, inadvertently using your frequency. The people at Trayco are really responsible for the damage."

"Well, that information ought to calm Steve down," John acknowledged. "In the meantime, Lisa"—he gave her a sheepish look, "take the rest of the day off. Let's give everyone a chance to forget about Randy for a while."

Lisa's spirits plummeted. Not only was Randy being banned from the premises, but it seemed she was destined to share his fate.

"If you'll let me have Randy," she told Chase dejectedly, "I'll be on my way."

"Since you're buying me dinner tonight, the least I can do is carry him out to your car."

She let her eyes meet his. The intensity in the silver-blue pools caught and held her. So this was what people meant when they spoke of a magnetic attraction...

Well, she had nothing to worry about. Chase had helped her, and he deserved a token of her gratitude. Besides, physical attraction was superficial and usually



fizzled in a short time. Serious trouble began only when a man and a woman grew to understand and like each other. It had been that way with Carl, her ex-husband. Their friendship had developed slowly, paving the way for a deeper commitment.

But that would never happen to her and Chase Sanger, so why worry? After the fair, or maybe even after tonight's dinner, she'd never see him again.

"I don't know Dallas very well," Lisa commented. "Can you recommend a nice restaurant? It would be fun to try someplace out of the ordinary."

"Say no more. I'll find a place for us."

A few moments later, after he helped place Randy in her car, Chase reached out and took her hand. "You're a very interesting woman, Lisa, and attractive as well. I'm going to enjoy your company over dinner tonight."

Before she had a chance to react, he released her hand. Her skin still tingled from the warmth of his touch. Perhaps her attraction to him wouldn't be as easy to handle as she had thought. "After what happened today, I find your optimism admirable," she ventured cautiously.

"It has nothing to do with optimism," he parried, a sensual promise laced in the smoothness of his voice. "It's more like an opportunity not to be missed."

---

"I would have to ask for an unusual place," Lisa said, staring at the huge simulated ark that seemed to float on the water at the end of the wooden pier. "What's it called?"

"Noah's Retreat."

"Definitely appropriate." They had driven for almost an hour before finding the place, and Lisa hoped the food would prove worth the trip. "Well, let's go inside and try our luck."

Moments later, they found themselves

staring at a list of strange entrees, including dishes called Third Pig, Roast Feast, and Surplus Calf Steaks, all printed on parchment designed to look like an open scroll and attached to a wooden board.

"I hear the dinners are all served in troughlike dishes," Chase said with a chuckle.

Lisa laughed. "I get the impression this isn't the type of place you usually frequent," she observed.

"No, but this is a fun change of pace. And it's private enough so we can talk. There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"I knew it!" she teased, hoping to lighten his mood. "You want to cajole me into revealing all of Randy's secrets."

He chuckled lightly, then leaned back in his chair. "I'll be honest with you, Lisa. The type of company I run would never get involved in a risky project like Randy. Sanger Toys is traditional and conservative, whereas McIver tends to be more trendy."

Lisa pursed her lips, not sure whether he was simply making an observation or criticizing her for having invented Randy. "I see," she finally said lamely.

"No, I don't think you do." A shrewd look entered his eyes. "I'm not being critical of Randy. He's just not in line with the concepts we espouse at Sanger. I believe that sophisticated electronic toys remind parents of the generation gap between them and their kids. That's why my company manufactures toys that remain basically the same year after year. We promote family unity by marketing items that both parents and children feel comfortable with."

"I see your point, but disagree with what you're saying," Lisa said. She paused to give the waiter her order, then waited for Chase to do same. "Modern toys aren't so different from the older

ones. Years ago, anything to do with cowboys, from six-shooters to hats, was a guaranteed best-seller. It's the same today, but modern cowboys battle in outer space with laser guns. Now kids yell 'zap-zap' instead of 'bang-bang.'"

"I never thought of it that way," Chase said, "but maybe it's time I did. You're very perceptive."

He paused. "To be honest, my board of directors wants to move in new directions. My problem is that I don't want to compromise our long-held philosophy just to cash in on a temporary trend." His forehead furrowed. "Our board thinks I'm a bit antiquated. They insist I make plans to launch a new line of toys, a less expensive line that we'll update every year as market trends fluctuate. They want toys that will capture the imagination of today's kids and become really hot sellers. I don't agree with them, but I'm willing to go along with the suggestion. At the same time, though, I intend to make sure we maintain the values Sanger's always stood for.

"I've heard a great deal about you and your work from several business sources," Chase went on, "and I read the article about you in *National Business* magazine. Your design ideas are original, but even more important, they're a great success with the public. The real reason I came to the toy fair today was to meet and talk to you. And now that I have, I'd like to offer you a job at Sanger."

"I never expected this," she said. "Particularly after the chaos Randy caused this afternoon."

"Your credentials speak for themselves, Lisa. I want you at Sanger." Chase's eyes gleamed. "You'd be in charge of our new line and would answer only to me. Of course, since these new toys will strongly affect the image we try to project at Sanger, you and I will have to work very closely together to make sure

their effect is not to our disadvantage. You'll create, and I'll modify as needed."

He paused. "I'm offering you an increase in salary and a challenge. If you and I can blend our viewpoints, I know we can create successful toys." He reached across the table and took her hand lightly. "Sanger needs someone like you. You pride yourself on originality, and you value the new as much as I do the old. We'll be an unbeatable team. Say yes."

The warmth of his palm seared the fabric of her thoughts. The attraction she felt to him was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Lisa breathed in deeply. She had to think clearly. The waiter set their meals before them. She ate, but her mind was on Chase's offer. She liked her job with McIver, but lately she *had* begun to feel frustrated and restless. McIver was run like many multimillion dollar corporations, and she'd been buried under stacks of paperwork for weeks. The endless meetings, the constant pressures to double her output yet keep her departmental budgets under tight constraint—it was all starting to take a toll on her energy. It wasn't burn-out exactly because her ideas hadn't stopped flowing, but she was beginning to grow weary.

Of course, the chance to work for a man as attractive as Chase Sanger was an added inducement. She'd never met anyone quite like him. He was so dignified and proper. He seemed to say and do the right thing automatically. Maybe some of his sophistication and self-confidence would rub off on her.

"You're not exactly jumping with enthusiasm," he commented after a lengthy silence. "Is there something I can do to make my offer more tempting to you?"

Lisa tried to keep her expression serious, but a smile crept over her lips as a wanton fantasy flashed into her head. She envisioned Chase standing before her,

slowly removing every stitch of clothing! Off came his shirt, revealing a powerful, sexy chest flecked with curly hair.

"I'm sorry," she replied, chiding herself for day-dreaming at such an inappropriate time. "Being imaginative isn't always a plus, you know. When someone asks me an open-ended question like that, my mind reels with possibilities—all of them too outrageous to mention."

Smiling, he cocked his head to one side. "I'm curious. Tell me more."

"I think I'll pass. I'd hate to ruin your good opinion of me." She folded her napkin and placed it beside her plate.

"Not a chance" he answered quietly.

Like an intimate caress, his words penetrated her defenses and left her feeling bewildered by an inexplicable sense of vulnerability.

"If you tell me what you're thinking, maybe I can help you decide." He stretched his hand across the table, stopping inches from her own, making no attempt to bridge the gap.

She leaned back in her chair, trying to disguise her nervousness. "I'd welcome a change in my life right now, and I do like to be challenged."

"Is that a yes?"

She bit the corner of her lip. "I just want to make sure this is the right step for me to take. You've admitted that you have misgivings about adding modern toys to your line. If you change your mind six months from now, where will that leave me? Will I still have a job?"

"Since our toys have stayed basically the same over the years, we don't have a research and development department as such. You could have a job in another department. Or, in lieu of that, I'd offer you three months' severance pay." He took a breath. "But all this is academic. I will *not* change my mind."

He smiled, and Lisa could feel her resistance giving way. "I'm going to make

one last concession in the hope that you'll take the job. I'm prepared to offer you a percentage of the profits from the toys you design for Sanger."

"Are you serious?"

"A *small* percentage," he emphasized, "but I don't think anyone else will match that."

She'd have to have the IQ of a broccoli spear to turn his offer down. "I don't know how wise this is, but I'm going to hope for the best." She gathered her courage and took a deep breath. "Chase Sanger, you've got yourself a toy designer."

"We've been at this for the past three days. You've got to keep an open mind, Chase!"

Lisa rubbed her aching lower back. She'd been slouched over her sketch pad for far too long.

"You must have rejected at least sixteen of my sketches," she went on. "I wouldn't mind so much if you'd come up with an idea of your own now and then, but you haven't been much help."

A month had passed since Lisa had agreed to accept the job designing a new line of toys for Sanger, Inc. She had moved to a small apartment on the outskirts of Ogden, Utah, the week before, and now she was midway through her first week at Sanger. She and Chase shared an office, and so far, the work was frustrating to say the least.

"Your suggestions are so far off base, I can't even think of a way to improve them, Lisa," Chase replied. "You're trying to take creatures from outer space and make them human. Like that stuffed doglike thing you dressed up in a bonnet and prairie skirt. I don't want aliens no matter how folksy you make them look."

Lisa's skin tingled as her gaze fell on the muscular forearms that extended from Chase's neatly rolled up shirtsleeves. But

the pleasant, enveloping warmth was little comfort to her, considering the trouble they were having agreeing on a toy concept.

"You were the one who decided that my proposed invention was a creature from outer space."

"The entire concept is wrong. I want something imaginative, not gimmicky." He paused thoughtfully. "Think along these lines. Let's say you walk into the home of a really conservative farmer who lives miles from the city and doesn't even own a television set. What sort of toy would his little girl be apt to play with and enjoy?"

Lisa picked up her giant sketch pad and pencils off the floor where she had been sitting sketching. "The same kind of toy any other girl would like. This isn't the nineteenth century, Chase. A simple rag doll isn't going to make it. Trust me. You might sell a few of them to farmers, though the one you described doesn't *live* on a farm. He's been dead for a hundred years."

Chase grimaced at her quip. "Humor me. Let's toss some ideas around, keeping my concept in mind."

Lisa sat down at her desk and, twirling a strand of hair around one finger, made a mental picture of the setting Chase had described. "I suppose the girl might like a stuffed cow, or maybe a horse," she said. "Boring, boring."

"Chase, brainstorming means that *two* people toss out ideas to spark each other's imaginations. Help me! Think of something. Don't just sit there like..." She stopped, then added. "A vegetable." She bit her lower lip. "A lettuce doll?"

"There's enough air in the room," he replied, "so we can't blame oxygen deprivation for that rotten idea."

Lisa sighed, then suggested, "Why don't we free-associate ideas? What's the first thing that comes into your mind when

you think of little girls?"

"Pink."

"Purple," she countered, then shrugged when he gave her a strange look. "That was always my favorite color."

"Soft," he ventured.

"Round." Seeing his perplexed expression, she added, "I think they look extra cute when they're a little bit chubby. Too bad it doesn't work that way with adult women."

He laughed. "How about pigtailed?"

"Okay," she replied. "Let's see what kind of composite I can sketch from this." A few minutes later, she stared at the drawing. "It looks like a cute, hairy glob."

He looked over her shoulder and nodded. "It sure does." He paused, then added pensively, "You know what we're missing? A theme. We could organize this type of information around a basic concept, but first we need to find that concept."

"Okay, let's go back to talking about little girls." She stood and began to pace around the room. "Sugar and spice and everything nice." She stopped abruptly and hurried back to her sketch pad. "I think I've got it."

He walked over and watched over her shoulder as she worked. "What is it?" he asked, studying the lilac and pink oval figure she had sketched.

Feeling the warmth of his breath on her neck, Lisa shivered, and her heart began to hammer at a frenzied tempo. "Go back to your desk. Having someone look over my shoulder makes me nervous. Let me finish, and then I'll explain." Struggling to keep her mind on her work, she selected a piece of colored chalk and began to fill in the details of her drawing. Ten minutes later she glanced up, a wide grin on her face. "Prepare to be awed."

Chase walked over and looked at her

sketch pad. His eyebrows furrowed as he studied it. "What is it, a giant radish woman? No, a giant turnip woman!"

"Turnip, radish. What's the matter with you? It's perfectly clear. We have just given birth to Ms. Beet! See her leafy green hair?"

He stared at the drawing. "I admit it's original. Girls might think it's cute. But why don't you make it Ms. Sugar Beet! They're a little longer and not quite so rounded. Aesthetically, it would look better. Besides, sugar beets figure prominently in the history of Utah. The Mormons brought the first beet seeds here in the 1850s. This state was the scene of one of the first successful attempts to manufacture beet sugar."

"Okay, Ms. Sugar Beet it is. It's a great concept. All I have to do is elongate the features a little bit." Her voice rose with excitement. "This concept offers all kinds of possibilities! For instance, we could computerize the pattern for the features, and make each doll slightly different from the others."

He nodded enthusiastically and began to pace. "And production costs would be relatively low. If the dolls catch on, they'll be the best thing that's happened to Sanger in years!" His eyes sparkled. "We could make special displays for the dolls that resemble the produce departments in grocery stores."

"That's a great idea." She began to draw once again. "I just had another. In your mock produce display, we could also feature Ms. Sugar Beet's 'Dressing.'" She looked at him expectantly. "Get it? That'll be the doll's clothing. We'll put her in western wear and call it Ranch Dressing. Evening wear we can tout as French Dressing, and so on."

"We've got our line!" Chase shouted triumphantly.

Lisa threw the sketch pad into the air and wrapped her arms around him in an

enthusiastic hug. "We've done it!"

His arms encircled her waist, and he pulled her against the hard, taut length of his body. Instantly, Lisa's excitement was replaced by a fiery sensuality that enveloped her in a seductive haze of heat. Chase's heart beat powerfully against her breast, its feverish tempo igniting inside her a wildfire of burning emotions. He moved his body against hers, letting her feel the sinewy musculature that attested to his masculinity.

Giddiness assailed Lisa. She wanted to remain in his arms and let him soothe the aching emptiness left by the desire he had awakened in her. Frightened by the intensity of her emotions, she placed a hand on his chest and began to gently push him away.

Chase loosened his hold, but instead of moving away, he lowered his mouth to hers and nibbled on her lower lip with exquisite tenderness.

Lisa felt her body grow liquid. She clung to him for support, wanting him to deepen his kiss, yet knowing that her will would not withstand the assault. She had to do something right now, or else accept the risk of placing herself entirely in his hands.

Not knowing what else to do, she feigned innocence and drew away. "Well, it looks as if we've done it," she said, gathering the sketches strewn over the top of her desk.

"We would have, if you'd given me another second," he said, weaving another meaning into his words.

"You've got the beginnings of a wonderful new line of toys," she chattered, hoping she could pass off their kiss as nothing more than the professional exuberance of two victorious co-workers.

Chase's eyes narrowed slightly while he studied her as if he were examining a beautiful but high-strung and unpredictable colt. "It's all right, you know," he

said softly.

Deliberately misinterpreting his words and pretending not to have caught the personal message he intended, she brought the subject back to business. "It's more than all right. It's going to be a terrific line. I can just feel it."

"Yes, I feel it, too. Something wonderful is happening."

The husky timbre of his voice endowed his message with a sensual power that tore the breath from her lungs.

---

They'd created the basic concept. Now the hard work would begin. Every detail would have to be spelled out before the production team could make the prototypes. It was Lisa's job to give the team accurate measurements, which meant sketching each separate piece. Everything—including the material and colors to be used—would be clearly defined.

The time-consuming, difficult work required all her attention, but this was the part that gave her the most satisfaction.

The afternoon passed quickly as Lisa and Chase worked side by side.

"It's five-thirty," Chase finally announced. "Time we both went home."

"Five-thirty? It can't be!" Lisa brushed back a lock of hair and checked her watch. "Where did the afternoon go?"

"You haven't said a word for the past three hours," he commented. "I've never seen anyone so engrossed in her work."

"I have a tendency to lose track of everything else once I start working on design sheets." She leaned back in her chair, stretching, and glanced at Chase. Wearing a tan cotton shirt and a brown-striped tie, he looked as fresh as he had that morning. How did he do it? "I'm ready to call it a day," she admitted. "My back's a little stiff."

"I know a great remedy for that," Chase ventured, but was interrupted by the telephone's insistent ringing. "Unless

this is an emergency, I'm telling whoever it is to wait until tomorrow. Even the boss needs time off now and then."

Chase picked up the receiver and identified himself. "You did *what?*" he demanded after a few seconds. "Why the hell didn't you ask me first? Being my brother doesn't entitle you to take my car whenever you feel like it." Easing himself deeper into the cushions of his chair, he rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "I'll manage to get home, Steve. Don't worry about it." His tone had softened slightly. "What time will you be back?" He paused. "All right, we'll talk then."

As Chase hung up, Lisa gave him a questioning glance. "Problems? I can give you a ride if you need one. My car's right outside."

"So was mine," he said with a mirthless laugh, "but Steve decided to borrow it to do an errand for the company. His car was in the shop for a tune-up, so he took mine and forgot to tell me. Then, instead of picking up our parts shipment and coming right back, he ran into a friend of his. He's still at the airport in Salt Lake. It'll probably be hours before he gets back, and the shipping department needs those parts now."

Strange as it seemed to Lisa, Chase didn't seem all that upset. If an employee had done the same thing to her, she'd have wanted to wring his neck. And Steve wasn't just any employee, he was Sanger's marketing coordinator. "I'll be glad to take you home, or wherever you have to go," she said. "I don't have any special plans for tonight."

"I accept. Let me grab my jacket, and we'll be on our way."

---

Lisa followed Chase's directions, and within ten minutes they arrived at a modest stucco-and-brick home nestled at the end of a cul-de-sac.

Chase took her hand. "Come inside

and have a drink with me to celebrate the birth of Ms. Sugar Beet. When Steve gets home with my car, we'll make the celebration complete by going out to dinner."

She started to protest, but curiosity overruled caution. She just had to see what the inside of his home looked like. "I'd enjoy that," she said. "To be honest, I'm really excited about Ms. Sugar Beet and the new line. I love working on it."

"I know my board of directors is going to love the idea as much as we do." He ushered her out of the car and to a side entrance, and pulled back a sliding glass door.

The room they entered was pleasant and masculine, though Lisa was surprised at the simplicity of the decor. Somehow, she had expected the president of Sanger Toys, Incorporated, to live in more lavish surroundings. "It looks comfortable," she commented, studying the brick fireplace and enormous brown-and-gold striped sofa in front of it. A large bookcase stood against one wall. The far wall was covered with floor-to-ceiling shelves, holding a number of athletic trophies.

"Those belong to Steve," Chase told her proudly. "He excels at almost every sport."

Her gaze focused on a sturdy oak desk with a picture of Steve in one corner and two large books, expensive editions, judging from the tooled leather covers. Unable to contain her curiosity, she glanced at the titles—*The Settlement of Utah* and *Utah Past and Present*. "Local history?" she said. "So that's why you knew about the sugar beets."

Chase smiled and strode over to a wet bar. "What would you like?"

"Fruit juice or a soft drink would be fine," she said.

Chase glanced at his watch. "I hope Steve comes home soon. I need to make sure the shipping department received

those parts today. The workers need them to repair a conveyor belt system. Besides that, I'm getting hungry, aren't you?"

"A bit," she replied.

He handed her a drink. "Steve can be so unrealistic at times, and he's been missing a lot of work recently. Of course, I realize I'm partly to blame for the way he is."

"How so?"

"It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Lisa nodded. She was interested in every facet of his life. "I'm a great listener."

They settled themselves on the sofa. Chase leaned back against the cushions, loosening his tie. "My father died when I was in college, and my mother died a year or so later. I took on the responsibility of raising Steve when he was ten years old. More than anything else, I wanted to give him the chance I never had to be a kid. As far back as I can remember, I always had a job at our company, and very little leisure time. I was expected to be responsible for myself and my actions."

Chase cleared his throat, gazing thoughtfully into the empty fireplace. "I wanted so much for things to be different for Steve that I overindulged him. He began to take his advantages for granted. I made a lot of mistakes, of course, but my biggest regret is that Sanger doesn't mean as much to him as it does to me."

He exhaled softly. "Steve's so used to having things handled for him that he lacks direction. He's never been challenged, so he needs me to prod him along. I chose his college for him, suggested a career at Sanger, and he promptly flunked out of school. When he came to work at Sanger full-time last year, I placed him in marketing because he couldn't decide what he wanted to do, and I thought the work would give him a good overview of the company."



"At least Steve lives here with you," Lisa pointed out. "You don't know how lucky you are to have your family around all the time. My dad was a captain in the navy. I never lived in one place for very long and never had aunts and cousins nearby, so I learned to put a great deal of importance on family. I was grateful that my parents were always there, at least, even though my dad and I never got along well."

"Since you care so much about family, I'm surprised you're not married," Chase commented.

"I was once," Lisa admitted.

"Was your ex-husband a military man, too?"

"Yes. In fact, I met Carl through my dad. He was assigned to my father's command. He'd come over to visit and spend a lot of time hanging around our house. I knew him for years before we became romantically involved, but seeing him practically every day made us grow even closer. Getting married seemed like the most natural thing in the world." She sighed. "The first couple of years, things were all right. Then Carl began carrier duty. He'd be home for three months. Then he'd go to sea for the next three. I learned to live without him, setting up my own routines and so forth. Then he came home, and I had to adapt to him all over again. It wasn't any easier for him, either. He was used to the rigid scheduling of military life and wanted the same thing when he was home with me. It didn't work. After being married for three and half years, we got a divorce."

"Do you miss him?" Chase asked quietly.

Lisa shook her head. "I've learned to live by myself, and I enjoy it." She hesitated, then added, "But every once in a while I remember what it was like to spend a quiet evening with someone special, someone I could be myself with.

That sense of belonging, of being at peace with the world, is hard to forget." She sipped her drink. "The problem is, I'm not sure if those feelings are real or an illusion we create for ourselves."

"I think they're real. I saw the way my mother and father treated each other. They were married for thirty years, and they always acted like newlyweds. That's the kind of marriage I'd like for myself."

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked softly.

"Lots of times," he kidded, laughing, then turning serious, "Actually, I haven't had much time to devote to anyone outside my family."

His stomach growled loudly, breaking the mood. He started to laugh. "This is when I usually have dinner. My refrigerator's practically empty right now, but I could refill our glasses and make some popcorn. Would you like that?"

"Sure." She hated breaking the atmosphere of intimacy, but perhaps it was for the best. "Let me help. I'll start the popcorn while you refresh the drinks. Where do you keep the popcorn and oil?"

Following Chase's instructions, she found the items she needed. She plugged in the cord of the popcorn maker and added vegetable oil and one popcorn kernel.

She jumped as the single kernel of corn popped. Lifting the dome carefully off the heated popper, she poured a quarter-cup of popcorn into the hot oil. Then, because there seemed to be only a few kernels left in the jar, she dumped them in as well. There turned out to be more of them than she had realized. Oh, well.

She returned to the livingroom and joined Chase on the couch to wait for the corn to finish popping. A few moments later, Chase tilted his head toward the kitchen, listening. "There's something strange about that sound."

"Popcorn's popping, that's all," she countered with a shrug.

"Then why can't we hear it hitting the plastic lid?"

She sucked in her breath. "Oh, no!"

"You didn't forget to put the lid on," he replied, eyes widening.

They bolted simultaneously off of the couch and into the kitchen.

The floor was littered with popcorn. Suddenly, as Chase sidestepped a small mound, his feet slid out from under him. Flailing his arms to regain his balance, he collided with Lisa and sent her reeling backwards. She tottered for an instant, then slid to the kitchen floor with a crunch.

Muttering a curse, Chase skated several feet across the slippery floor before smashing into the near wall. He tumbled downward, landing inches from Lisa with a loud thump.

Fluffy white kernels, like giant flakes of snow, continued to spew from the uncapped popper. Lisa caught one in midair and offered it to Chase.

"Are things ever normal when you're around?" Chase grumbled, rubbing his lower back. "We're lucky we didn't break something."

"I'm sorry. This was all my fault. I tell you what. Let me clean up the mess. Then I'll make it up to you by giving you a massage."

His eyes lit up. "You've got a deal."

He got to his feet, then helped her up. She finished sweeping the kitchen by the time he'd wiped the counter.

"I'm ready for my massage," he said eagerly. "Shall I lie down now?"

She had intended to give him a quick back rub, but suddenly she realized he had something very different in mind.

She accompanied him back to the couch in the den. Standing before her, Chase removed his jacket and tie and pulled his shirt free from his pants. When he began to unbutton it, she blurted much too quickly, "You don't have to do

that."

He paused, a roguish grin crossing his features. "Your massage will be much more effective if I'm not wearing my shirt. However, if the sight of my bare chest would bother you too much..."

The playfulness in his tone surprised her. He was deliberately trying to rattle her!

Lisa had no intention of giving him that satisfaction. She fixed a cool gaze on him as he peeled off his shirt. His lean, broad torso was dusted with curly dark hair.

"I'm looking forward to having you"—he paused momentarily as he draped his shirt over the back of the sofa—"give me this rub-down."

"Good. Then lie down," she replied, determined not to appear the least bit flustered as he stretched out on the sofa, face down.

Sitting beside him, she began to knead the sinewy muscles of his back. She worked her way slowly downward until her hands were at the small of his back. Mischievously, she ran her index finger along the bare skin just above the waistband of his pants.

Chase shivered as he felt her feather-light touch. Slowly, he raised himself up on his elbows, then turned over on his back. With his head propped up on a pillow, he regarded her with searching eyes.

With only a trace of hesitation, she placed a palm over his heart. The hair-roughened texture stirred a fiery, pulsing awareness deep within her.

With infinite tenderness he pulled her toward him. There was something infinitely protective and masculine in the way he touched her.

An impatience born of desire rippled through her as she waited for their lips to meet. When they did, she shuddered slightly and melted into him.

Taking the opportunity offered by her

parted lips, he plundered her sweetness with an assertiveness that left her yearning for more. She pressed herself into his kiss, her tongue tangling with his. Chase groaned, and crushed her against him, his mouth demanding, his self-control obviously shattered.

Suddenly a male chuckle broke the silence. "I *knew* it! So you really *do* have designs on our new designer, Chase."

Lisa jumped away and looked up to see Steve Sanger lounging in the doorway.

Chase grabbed his shirt from the back of the sofa and angrily confronted his brother. "Where the hell have you been? We've been waiting here for over an hour."

"I dropped the supplies off with the night shift on my way over here," Steve answered, "and I think you owe *me* one, big brother. Things seem to have worked out very well for you," he added in a conspiratorial whisper.

Lisa saw Chase clench his fists, but before the argument could go any further, she made a frantic grab for her purse. "Chase, I really am tired tonight. Do you mind if I take a rain check on dinner?"

As she hoped, Chase's anger seemed to dissipate. "No, of course not," he said, and rose with her to walk out to her car.

"Lisa, I'm sorry our evening ended on such an awkward note," he said once they were outside.

"No problem." She smiled reassuringly. "I enjoyed the time we spent together."

"Did you really?" he asked.

His seductive voice seemed to wrap around her like a warm cocoon. "Yes. And I even learned something," she added, unlocking the car door and turning to face him.

He caressed her cheek with his palm. "What's that?"

"Popcorn leads to trouble," Lisa whispered. "See you tomorrow."

The next afternoon, sketch pads in hand, Lisa sought out the design shop, which was located one floor above her office.

A young woman and two men were working busily.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"I'm Lisa Fleming, and I've got the specification sheets for our new toy line."

"Good!" exclaimed the eldest man.

"I'm Lionel Sanger."

"You must be related to Chase," Lisa said.

"We all are," the woman answered.

"I'm Lois, and this is Mike Sanger," she said, pointing to the tall, thin man on her left. "We're all cousins of Chase's."

After they all shook hands, Lisa announced, "These are the specification sheets for Ms. Sugar Beet, our new doll. You'll be able to get a good idea of what we're trying to create from these."

Mike set the papers on a drafting table so that he and his cousins could study the sketches. "We'll start work on it right away. Will you be in your office, in case we have any questions?"

"I should be there all day."

Lois grinned. "I'm glad Sanger's going to manufacture toys for little girls. If you need us for anything, give us a ring on the intercom. We'll be glad to help."

Lisa hesitated, then with a burst of courage, said in a low voice, "There is something I need, but to be honest it's for a joke. I'd like to play on Chase." She described what she wanted. "So what do you think? Can you find an old jack-in-the-box we can modify slightly?"

"What you want is relatively simple," said Lois. "Is there a special reason behind this trick?"

"Yes, but it's better if you don't know," Lisa teased.

Lois laughed. "Have it your way, but remember you owe me one!"

"You've got it."



Chase walked in shortly after lunch. He had been at a board meeting all morning. Before he had time to greet her, the telephone began ringing. "Wouldn't you know it?" he muttered, picking up the receiver.

Lisa watched furtively. She'd placed the jumbo jack-in-the-box on the farthest corner of his desk, with a typed warning taped to it that read, "Turn this handle at your own risk."

A few moments into his telephone conversation, the box captured Chase's attention. Absentmindedly, he ran his hand over the lid and turned it around to examine the other side. His attention was diverted for several seconds by his caller's demands.

"Murray," he said, "I won't have those other figures for you until the end of the week. That's the best I can do." Impatiently he jabbed the handle with his index finger and watched it whirl around.

Suddenly the lid sprang open, and a cloud of multicolored confetti exploded into the air, then floated slowly down, covering Chase's head and shoulders and all but obscuring the top of his desk in a mantle of rainbow dots.

"Oh, hell!" he muttered. "No, Murray, I wasn't speaking to you. Listen, I've got a crisis on my hands. I'll get back to you, okay?"

Chase slammed down the receiver and scooped up a handful of confetti from his desk. He leaned over as if to dump the paper into the trash, then instead whirled and tossed it into the air over Lisa's head.

At her shocked expression, he began laughing. "That'll teach you. From now on, make sure you're prepared to receive your share of any surprises you have for me."

Quickly recovering, she joined his laughter. "I knew there was a streak of

mischievous in you! You *can* stop being serious long enough to fool around."

"I'll fool around with you anytime," he said huskily.

Lisa cleaned one side of Chase's desk while he concentrated on the other. As she cleared the rug of the polka dotted mess, she uncovered a sheet of paper that appeared to have been torn from a magazine. Her eyes widened as she realized it was an article on Randy the Robot!

"I'll go down to the janitorial closet and see if I can find a hand vacuum," Chase said. "It'll make this mess easier to clean up."

Lisa glanced up and nodded quickly, anxious to read the article. As soon as Chase had left the room, she scanned the contents, the blood draining from her face as the full import of the article sunk in. Randy the Robot, her last project for McIver, had turned out to be an abysmal failure with the public—and some toy company analysts were blaming her! Her throat constricted as she read that, not having received enough orders for Randy to break even, the company had suffered a substantial loss.

The reporters suggested the failure should be attributed to the design team, then went on to speculate why she, the project manager, had left McIver.

In horrified silence, Lisa moved away from the desk just as Chase stepped, empty-handed, into the office. "No luck. The vacuum was so large, it wouldn't have been worth the effort to haul it over here."

At least he hadn't seen her reading the article, Lisa noted gratefully. Her mouth felt dry. Would it do any good to say something about what she'd read? She felt trapped. If she tried to explain that her team had designed Randy according to instructions from McIver's president, would he think she was making excuses? She continued picking up confetti in

silence. The article must have created some doubt in Chase's mind about her abilities.

Did everyone in the business blame her? Her assistant at McIver, Jerry Donaldson, would know. He always kept up with the latest rumors. If only she could get away long enough to make a quick telephone call!

"I keep a hand vacuum in the trunk of my car," she said. "Let me go get it."

"I'll go," Chase countered. "Just give me your keys."

Even better, she thought, complying with his request. She waited until his footsteps faded, then began to dial. Her brief conversation with Jerry confirmed her worst fears. As the leader of McIver's design team, she was being blamed for the robot's commercial failure. She'd have to accept the fact that her professional standing was at a decidedly low ebb, Jerry told her. Nonetheless, he assured her, her next success would silence any skepticism about her work. But what if Ms. Sugar Beet wasn't successful, Lisa thought dismally as she hung up the phone.

Chase returned and quickly restored order to their office. "You know"—his words wove into her consciousness—"this trick reminds me of the things Steve used to do when we were kids. He always tried to get me to play with him. Poor guy! I think he was always a bit lonely around the house. I was with him as often as I could be, but Dad didn't make it easy. He'd always find work for me to do. About the only place where I could be alone was my tree house.

"Your dad built a tree house for you? I thought he didn't encourage you to play," Lisa remarked.

Chase's mood became somber. "Dad would never have built that for me," he confessed. "My uncle Jack did. I guess he felt sorry for me." He chuckled. "That tree house is still in our back yard."

"I wish you'd shown it to me when I was there the other day."

"Oh, it's not at that house. I bought the place you saw a few years ago. Once Steve grew up, we decided to move closer to the plant.

"So you sold the house where you grew up?" Lisa asked.

Chase shook his head. "I left a caretaker in charge of it. Someday when I get married I plan to go back and raise my family there." He paused. "It's almost quitting time. Would you like to drive over to the house with me? It's about thirty minutes from here."

"Sure," Lisa replied, hoping the drive would distract her from her worries.

"Let me call the caretaker and tell him we're coming. I'll even invite you inside my tree house. How's that for hospitality?"

"I'll answer that *after* I've seen it," she said warily. "The last time I tried to climb a tree, I ended up with my leg in a cast for six weeks."



Two hours later, Chase parked near the entrance of a sprawling ranch-style home. He escorted Lisa to the front door and ushered her inside.

Lisa gaped at the huge foyer, with its walnut paneling and paintings of western landscapes. Mexican tiles covered the floor. "Good grief! Your entryway is the size of my entire apartment," she exclaimed.

"All the rooms are large," Chase agreed, "but the house gives the illusion of being bigger than it actually is. It's partly because of the decor."

When they reached the oak-paneled library, Lisa strolled to the window. "It's almost sunset. Before the sun goes down, why don't you show me that tree house you were talking about?"

Chase's eyes lit up. "I thought you'd never ask!"

He escorted her outside into the back garden. "And now the *piece de resistance* of this guided tour." He pointed to an enormous maple tree at the very edge of the lawn.

Looking up, Lisa could barely discern a green structure wedged into a wide fork in the branches.

When they reached the base of the tree, Lisa glanced warily at the knotted rope dangling from the little house. "And this is how you get up there?"

He held the rope out to her. "Want to give it a try?"

"You're talking to a woman who failed gym class repeatedly," she said. "I have a vague mental image of how this should be done, but I'm not at all sure my arms are strong enough to pull me up."

"That's what the knots are there for." Chase stood close behind her and took her waist in his hands. "I'll steady you."

The tree house wasn't much more than ten feet above the ground, but by the time she reached it Lisa felt as if she'd scaled one of the Alps. "I made it!" she cried.

To her chagrin, Chase accomplished in less than a minute the task that had taken Lisa five all-but-eternal minutes to complete. His grin was triumphant.

"Don't you dare gloat," she cautioned.

"Okay, I won't gloat. Isn't this a fantastic place for a kid?" He walked around the tree house and smiled, noting the two unrolled sleeping bags lying in the center of the room. "My caretaker Manuel's kids must have spent the night here," he observed. "I hope they had fun!"

"I'd be scared to stay here all night," Lisa replied slowly. "This place must be pitch-dark and truly scary."

"Are you kidding? This is a boy's version of heaven. It's not so bad for an adult either," he added as an afterthought. "The view is spectacular by moonlight.

And it's completely private."



They sat side by side on one of the sleeping bags. "Tell me something," Chase said, "how did your father feel about your ex-husband?"

"My father and my husband approved of each other from the day they met," Lisa answered. "Dad was furious when he learned about our divorce. He was certain that the failure of our marriage was my fault. He claimed I just didn't want to face reality. According to him, that's why I'm successful at creating toys." She pursed her lips and exhaled softly. "He thought I'd demanded too much of Carl and been disappointed when he failed to live up to my romantic expectations."

"And what do you say?"

"I have dreams"—she met his eyes in a level gaze—"but they aren't unrealistic. I'm not afraid to fall in love again, Chase. Making a home and starting a family is all part of what I want for myself someday. But the man I choose will have to share my dreams, and I his. I want a friend and a lover, as well as a father for my children."

"There's nothing wrong with that. I want the same from a woman. But it's hard for me to let down my guard. It takes a great deal of trust." He stretched out on the sleeping bag, propping himself up on one elbow. His eyes didn't leave her face as he reached for her hand. "I care about you. It would hurt to find I'd disillusioned you by revealing that I'm not as confident or as perfect as you think I am."

Her throat tightened, and she scarcely breathed. He had offered her the gift of himself and was not waiting to see what she'd do with it. He had captured her heart.

Instinct guided her. As the reddish hues of twilight came over them, she melted in his arms.

Holding her against him, he lowered

her gently to the sleeping bag. For a moment he stayed poised above her, his eyes taking in every detail of her face. Then slowly his mouth descended.

As his lips moved over her, Lisa's heart drummed in her ears. An aching tenderness enveloped her, making her cling to him.

He unbuttoned her blouse, and slipped his hand beneath the folds of the cloth. Heat shot through her. Restless, Lisa arched toward him, pressing her lower body intimately against him.

He caressed her slowly, with infinite tenderness, as if each touch were a sacred ritual to be celebrated with reverence and care. Beauty and pleasure merged in Lisa's mind to become one infinite circle. She became lost in a world of incandescent light, glorying in the silken feel of Chase's tongue as he sampled her fevered skin, leaving a moist, blazing imprint.

"I want to know and love every inch of you. To taste your sweetness until it becomes a part of me," he whispered against her ear.

She clung to him. "Then love me, Chase, and take all the love I give you in return." She raised her face up to meet his lips.

He was greedy for her. Chase plundered her mouth in a scorching kiss. Lisa moaned, twisting toward him, inciting him with the wantonness of her own passion.

The clothing that separated them became an annoying inconvenience that they joyously discarded. Again Lisa sought refuge in his arms. Her sensitized breasts brushed against the hair-roughened texture of his chest as she melted against him.

"Tell me you love me," Chase whispered.

"I do," she managed, then gasped, her body consumed by fire.

She moved sinuously against him,

caressing his body with her own. She teased and taunted him with gentle strokes, her lips playing over his fevered skin in a slow, erotic dance. He moaned, the tortured sound low and masculine.

Chase drew in a long, shaky breath as the intimacy of her touch intensified. Guided by instinct and the urgency of his response, she continued to minister to him.

"Lisa, forgive me, but I can't take any more of this." His voice was husky and filled with passion, and Lisa whispered her assent.

Skillfully, Chase positioned her beneath him. Lisa arched as small explosions were triggered in her bair. He held her mouth in a deep kiss, his movements increasing to a lightning tempo. Then, in a moment of glorious release, she found a reality that was brighter and more beautiful than any she had ever known.

So, this was love...

---

Lisa stared at her watch. Chase was only upstairs at a board meeting, but she couldn't help missing him. The office seemed so empty without him. She smiled at herself. It was wonderful to be in love. The sun looked brighter, the leaves appeared more golden than they had during previous autumns, and the starry, moonlight nights were glorious. She felt as if she were seeing the world for the first time.

Now all she had to do was prove herself worthy of Chase's trust and confidence by making this new line of toys a fabulous success. She gulped. A biting fear gnawed at her insides. Her stomach knotted.

If she failed, she would hurt not only Chase but his family and his company as well—the very things he valued most.

Lisa lifted her chin. She wouldn't allow self-doubt. She'd never worked harder on a project in her life, it simply had to pay off.



Everything seemed to be happening at once. A month ago Lisa had come up with the idea for Ms. Sugar Beet. The next day Chase had taken her to his childhood home and they had made love in his treehouse.

In the four weeks that had passed since then, Lisa's relationship with Chase had progressed rapidly. He had introduced her to his eccentric and lovable family, and they had all pronounced her perfect for Chase and for Sanger toys.

At work Lisa had created more "dressings" for Ms. Sugar Beet, as well as a "Beep," a convertible sportscar shaped like a vegetable crate, Chase was so excited about the new line of toys that he had even taken out a substantial loan so that he could hire extra workers for a second shift. That way, they would be sure to have enough toys on the market for Christmas.

As Lisa sat and mused about the success of the new line of toys, Chase's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Hi, there!" he said as he strolled into the office. "I've got fantastic news."

"I'm all ears," Lisa said.

"Our sales representatives have started to report in. They've been showing everyone the brochures on our new line, and the response has been very positive. Of course the preproduction orders aren't all in yet, but the situation looks very encouraging. People seem to really like Ms. Beet."

Chase pulled her into his arms and twirled her around in the air. "Bringing you to Sanger was the second best thing I ever did."

"What's the first?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Falling in love with you, of course." He stood her on her feet, his eyes sparkling.

Lisa adjusted her skirt uneasily. A little voice warned her it wouldn't be a good idea to get carried away by Chase's news.

Retailers had been enthusiastic about Randy the Robot, too, but they hadn't placed.

"Speaking of love," Chase ventured, "how about coming up with a boyfriend for Ms. Sugar Beet? It would give the line a nice finishing touch."

"Good idea," she responded eagerly. Anything to give their toys added sales appeal.

"Let's see... What goes with sugar beets?"

"Sugar cubes?"

She shook her head. "Forget it. They're square, colorless, and boring."

"Turnips?"

"Too similar to beets."

Chase was about to offer another suggestion when they were interrupted by the sound of a cart smashing against the wall outside their office. The next instant, Chase's lanky cousin Don appeared.

"You're delivering our new terminal?" Chase asked, horrified that his clumsy cousin would be entrusted with such a task.

"Don't worry, I've been real careful," Don assured him.

Lisa chuckled. Poor Don. His long, angular features and tall, gangly body accentuated his thinness. He looked like a comic-strip character. She stared at him, blinked, then stared again. For an instant, she saw him as a stalk of sugarcane with human features.

Picking up her charcoal pencil, she began to sketch.

"You've got an idea?" Chase asked, instantly alerted.

"I was looking at Don, and suddenly I had a flash of inspiration. How about Mr. Sugarcane?"

"That's great!" Chase replied enthusiastically.

After Don left, Lisa continued sketching while Chase began to unpack the computer hardware.

He extracted a video monitor and keyboard from their foam packing. "This is our newest tool," he said. "A work station will be delivered later today, but in the meantime, I'll set up here." He pulled a chair up to the table, then glanced at her work.

"Once you finish the sketch of Mr. Sugarcane, you can use the computer to generate the graphics for the specification sheets. We have several design and data base programs available. Some time this week I'll have one of the secretaries feed your paperwork on the Ms. Sugar Beet line into the computer. Then we'll put the paperwork into boxes and store the folders in our warehouse."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather transfer the data into the computer myself. Some of my notes might be hard to read, and just one incorrect entry can alter a design considerably."

"Sure. That's no problem."

Lisa moved to sit on the arm of Chase's chair and handed him her sketch. "What do you think?"

"In charcoal gray, I think he could pass for an undertaker."

"You have a point," she said, laughing. "I'll tell you what. We'll skip the top hat and dress him in a maroon velvet sports coat that complements Ms. Sugar Beet's color."

"That'll work." Chase nodded thoughtfully. "The computer can generate color graphics. Why don't you give it a try and see how it comes out?"

Lisa sat down at the keyboard, turned on the power, and began to scan the user command sheet Chase had placed on the table.

"You know, this is the best day I've had in months. I really feel that Sanger's on its way now," Chase confided. "I feel good about the company and about myself. I couldn't have done it without you, Lisa." He squeezed her shoulder.

"You could have managed without me," she replied, giving his hand a squeeze, "but I'm glad I've brainwashed you into thinking I'm indispensable."

Once again, though, she worried that his enthusiasm was premature. A variety of things could still go wrong. Too much optimism could boomerang on him—and ultimately come back to haunt her.



For the next week, Lisa alternated between joy and anxiety. Things were going too smoothly. Chase did his best to reassure her, but he could not dispel her sense of impending doom. Then Chase's cousin, Larry Sanger, strode into their office, and Lisa's worst fears came true.

Lisa sat quietly as the men talked. Larry was saying, "Chase; I assure you our equipment is working perfectly. It's the design of the Beep that's at fault. Maybe it's one of those designs that works in theory but not in practice."

"I guarantee it's not a design problem," Lisa insisted. "The first prototype was practically indestructible."

"Well, for whatever reason, the models are falling apart. In fact, a great number of them break while they're being assembled. They can't endure the slightest amount of stress. It's as if the pieces aren't really fitting together, and that," he repeated, looking squarely at Lisa, "is a design problem."

"Are you certain you're following my specifications?" she asked.

"My production people took the specs straight from the computer data banks."

"We have to find the problem." Lost in thought, Chase tapped his pencil against the telephone. "The first step will be to compare the figures on paper with those on the computer."

Lisa bit her lip anxiously. "I won't say it's impossible that I typed in the wrong figure," she said, "but I really doubt it. I'm too careful with things like that."

"It's got to be checked out." Chase's tone made it clear that the matter was not open to discussion. "How long will it take you to verify your work, Lisa?"

"One, maybe two hours, once I retrieve my handwritten notes. The problem is that the notes are stored in boxes somewhere in the warehouse. It could take hours or even days to find them."

Larry glanced at Chase, then at Lisa. "Tell you what I'll do. While you get our warehouse staff to locate what you need, I'll go over the calibrations we've made on each of our machines. I'll compare every figure against the computerized specs and make sure there are no discrepancies."

"Good," Chase affirmed. "In the meantime, Larry, let's stop production on the Beep. I realize it's going to cost us money, but we don't have a choice. We'll just have to work hard to find the problem quickly." Chase accompanied Larry to the door. "Keep me posted on your progress."

"Will do."

Chase started back to his desk, then suddenly stopped. "Lisa, would you recognize your boxes if you saw them?"

"I labeled them R and D, for research and development, with a red marker on all four sides. But I didn't specify what each box contained."

"Come on, then. We'll both go to the warehouse, supervise the search, and see if we can speed things up."

They spent the next three hours helping five warehousemen locate the missing boxes. When they returned to their office, Larry was waiting for them.

"I was just about to leave you two a note," he said. "I checked and double-checked. All the machines have been calibrated with the exact specifications that came from the computer. There's no error on our part."

Lisa gave Chase a worried glance. "I'll check my notes against what's been

entered on the computer."

"I'll help you," Chase offered.

An hour later, they'd verified the figures. No mistake had been made in Lisa's calculations or her transcription. That meant the problem lay in the design itself.

Lisa felt her world crashing in about her. "I guess Larry was right," she told Chase. "There must be something wrong with the design of the Beep."

"Lisa, I'll assist you in any way I can, but we have to find the problem soon. I bought new stamping and molding machinery and hired extra assemblers so we can get the line out as soon as possible. Add to that the fact that I have to pay our employees whether they're working or not, and you begin to understand why I'm so concerned. The cost of this slowdown is going to be enormous.

"The holiday season usually brings in three-quarters of our yearly profits, and I'm counting on those sales," he went on. "But unless the whole line goes out as planned, I'm afraid Sanger's going to show a loss for the first time in years."

Filled with guilt and compassion born of love, Lisa made up her mind to find the problem and solve it for Chase's sake. "Let me see what I can do. By the end of the week I'll have an answer for you."

---

Although she spent all week recalculating each figure, Lisa was unable to find a flaw in her design.

On Friday, she ate dinner at her desk, still poring over the computer graphics.

"Lisa, come on." Chase pulled her gently to her feet. "It's time to leave. Enough is enough. You've been pushing yourself like this too long."

"No, I'm staying right where I am," she replied.

He gave up. "Okay. How late do you plan to stay tonight?"

"I'll probably sit in that chair, star-

ing at the same drawings and figures, for the rest of my life," she replied dejectedly.

"With such job security, why in the world are you depressed?" he teased.

Lisa laughed.

"That's better. You've been frowning for days." Chase kissed her parted lips with a fierce possessiveness. "And I've missed being with you," he said.

"Chase, there's something I want to discuss with you," she said, moving away from him.

"Shoot," he said.

"No matter how hard I try, I simply can't find any flaw in my design. I can't seem to save you from the immediate crisis, but I think I've found a way to mitigate the results."

"Let's hear it."

"It'll be much easier for you to explain the delay in the Beep's shipment if I resign. People are bound to remember what happened with Randy the Robot, and the blame will fall on me instead of on the company."

"You're not leaving," he said stubbornly.

"Listen to me," she pleaded. "There's obviously a problem with the Beep. I can't find out what's wrong, and it's too late now to redesign it. Maybe the rumors about me were more accurate than I realized. There is a possibility that I've lost what it takes to be a designer. Burn-out's a fact of life in our business. You know that."

"You're overreacting, Lisa. Someone who's burned out couldn't possibly have invented a line like the one you've created for us. If there's trouble, we'll face it together." He reached for her hand and pressed it to his lips, then his heart. "You're the woman I love, and I need your support now more than ever."

Lisa could feel the quick, steady drumming of his heart beneath her fingertips.

She stepped into the circle of his arms,

wishing she could live up to the faith he had in her. He sought her mouth, and she yielded willingly. The male power of his kiss sent a shiver up her spine. Breathless, she clung to him, unwilling to end the encounter. Then, gathering courage, she stepped away.

Her mind was made up. There was nothing more to say. If she truly loved him, there was only one thing she could do. And because she loved him, it would be the hardest thing she'd ever done.

"I'm going to work one more hour. Then I'm going home to bed," she said. "If you stay at the office, you'll just distract me," she told him gently. "Go home and relax. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

He kissed her lightly. "See you then."

After he'd gone, Lisa stared at an indeterminate spot across the room. Chase wouldn't leave her, even though she was the cause of all the problems he was facing. The same sense of loyalty that bound him to his family would keep him from letting her resign to protect his company. But if she quit, the blame for the slowdown would fall on her, minimizing the bad publicity Sanger was sure to receive. Also, the loss of revenue would be easier to explain to the bankers if she no longer worked there.

Lisa wrote a letter of resignation and left it on Chase's desk. Attaching a personal note to the formal letter, she assured him that she'd continue to review her notes until she found the problem with Ms. Beet's Beep.

There was nothing more to do. After taking her personal belongings to her car, she drove out of the Sanger complex and into the darkness.

Lisa spent a restless night. She was certain she was doing the right thing by resigning, yet that didn't make it easier to accept the fact that her work at Sanger

and her relationship with Chase had come to an end.

The next morning she braced herself for the expected call from Chase. No matter what he said, she was determined not to allow him to persuade her to return. If she stayed, he'd eventually see that she had failed him and then he'd begin to resent her. She wouldn't be able to stand watching the resentment slowly build a wall between them, destroying the love they had shared. Her solution was quicker and less painful.

To her surprise and sorrow, Chase never called. Obviously, he had come to the same conclusion she had. At nightfall, she began to pack. It seemed pointless to stay in town.

She had just closed the first suitcase when a knock sounded on her door. Her throat tightened. She hoped it was Chase, but knew that if it was, she shouldn't open the door. She wasn't strong enough to say good-bye to him in person. "Who is it?" she asked hesitantly.

"Telegram for Ms. Fleming," a gravelly voice informed her.

Puzzled, Lisa opened the door.

Chase smiled at her. "I lied. I don't have a telegram for you."

"If you're here about my resignation, I've made up my mind. Nothing you say will change it," she said.

"I did come here on business," he admitted matter-of-factly. "I want to ask you a few questions about the Beep."

"Oh." Taken aback, Lisa stared at him. "You might as well come in."

He walked in and quickly made himself comfortable on the couch beside her. "Have you been able to find anything wrong with your design since the last time we spoke?"

"No, I've been over and over those figures. I've recalculated everything and studied the design from every conceivable angle."

"That's what I thought," he said slowly. "I realize you've made up your mind to quit working at Sanger, and I don't want to interfere with your decision, but would you mind doing me one last favor? I'd like you to attend a little celebration tomorrow night with me. It's actually a costume party. Everything's already set, and I'd feel awfully foolish if you didn't come."

All at once she couldn't contain her anger and disappointment. "I don't believe you," she exclaimed. "Resigning was probably the hardest thing I've done in my entire life, and here you sit, calmly asking me to go to a party with you! Do you have any idea how awful I feel right now?"

Suddenly Chase began to laugh. "Would you still feel that way if I said I'd found the problem and it wasn't your fault at all?"

She gasped. "You're serious?"

He nodded.

As the words seeped into her brain, she picked up a small pillow and began to hit him over the head. "You skunk! You had news like that, and you didn't tell me right away?"

He grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet. Pinning her arms behind her back, he held her prisoner against him. "Oh, I do like you when you lose your temper," he goaded.

Her heart began to hammer. His physical superiority sparked something sensuous and primitive within her. The warmth radiating from the hard planes of his body seemed elemental and erotic. Then he claimed her with a thrilling kiss that made her feel like wax melting from a candle.

"Now are you ready to listen?" he whispered in her ear, his breathing ragged.

"If that's what you really want," she replied, nuzzling his neck.

"Well, if you're not curious. . ."

"Don't be such a tease."

Chase laughed. "All right. I've got my revenge for the way you made me feel with your resignation. I guess what it all comes down to is that I believed in you more than you believed in yourself. When you assured me you had double-checked your figures, I dismissed the possibility that the problem could be a design flaw and began to look for other alternatives."

"Like what? Your cousin had already checked the machinery."

"That's where we went wrong. We were so busy looking for design or equipment problems that we never carefully examined the broken cars. I cut up one of the prototypes and measured all of its parts. When I compared the dimensions to those of the faulty cars, I discovered that the plastic parts on the assembly-line cars were slightly thinner. That meant the plastic was being stretched farther than it was supposed to be, which weakened it."

"That's interesting, but not conclusive," she commented thoughtfully. "Do you think that's the source of the problem?"

"I wasn't sure at first, but it was the first lead I'd had; I decided to look into it, so I X-rayed one of the faulty Beeps. Plastic doesn't normally show up in X-rays, but we've been mixing barium in with the plastic parts as a safety precaution. That way, if a child swallows a piece, doctors can locate it easily."

She nodded. "And what did you find?" she asked quickly.

"When I studied the X-ray plates, I detected stress lines in the Beep's internal structure at the same points where breakage has been occurring. I tracked the problem back to the mold we were using for mass manufacturing. They're made out of a new alloy we've never worked with before. The high heat involved in the production process caused the

molds to expand more than we estimated. When the distended molds were used to stamp out the parts, they squeezed the plastic almost to the breaking point. That's why the Beeps were falling apart."

"And the problem didn't show up on the prototypes because they were made in different molds. Of course! So now what?" she asked, basking in an immense sense of relief.

"Well, the solution was simple. We're using a slightly thinner plastic that won't require such high heat to melt, and that will keep the molds from overexpanding." He smiled triumphantly. "With no stress from excessive pressure, the plastic doesn't break. We've already resumed production, and it looks as if we'll meet our deadlines."

Lisa closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I can't tell you how happy I am. I'm so glad it wasn't my fault after all. I thought I'd let you down."

"You could never do that, sweetheart."

"I guess I've joined the ranks of the employed again," she said happily.

"Now, wait a minute. Let's not rush into this." Chase pursed his lips, as if seriously considering his alternatives. "After all, there's the matter of the letter of resignation you left on my desk. What do you think I should do about that?"

"Tear it up?" she suggested hopefully.

"Let's negotiate."

"What are your terms?" She placed her arms around his neck and rubbed her upper body sensuously against his.

His mouth, warm and hungry, closed over hers. "Promise me you'll never run out on me like that again," Chase growled, his voice raw with emotion.

"I was trying to do what was best for you," she answered, her flesh tingling where the heat of his palms seared through her thin blue shirt.

"The best thing for me is never to be

without you.”

“I couldn’t have stayed away from you, Chase,” she muttered thickly. “I love you too much for that.”

He lifted her off the floor, carried her across the room, and set her gently on the sofa. Without taking his eyes from her, he stripped off his clothing. Moments later, he lay naked beside her on the couch. “You look so vulnerable, so beautiful. I like you this way—open to my touch and needing my love as much as I need yours.”

Chase undressed her slowly, tasting and teasing the flesh he exposed. Needing to touch him, she dug her fingers into the hard muscles of his shoulders and ran her palms down his body until she found the masculine core she sought. His arousal made her reel with a sense of feminine power.

His restraint shattered, Chase positioned himself above her. His need, intense and wild, merged with the imperative demands of her own passion. She yielded to tumultuous ecstasy. As their voices met in one final cry, they emerged into a dazzling universe of a thousand suns.



The next afternoon all of the Ms. Beet line was displayed in the office. Lisa stared at the table set up against one wall. Mr. Sugarcane stood next to Ms. Sugar Beet, and around them were the Beep, the Dressings, and the advertising displays.

“Chase, I feel like a proud parent,” she said, beaming him a wide smile.

“I know what you mean. I’m really looking forward to our presentation at the party tonight. This year we’re not sparing any expense. We’ve invited the press as well as our clients and distributors. I want Ms. Beet’s introduction to the public to be nothing less than spectacular. We’ve worked hard. Now it’s time to put our products to the test and see how people react.”

Lisa’s doubts began to surface again as she thought about her work. She felt the pressure mounting. If the press reports were bad, they could negatively affect future sales. Chase had already proved his faith in her, but would his feelings change if his clients showed little interest in the line? Would he equate her with the failure?”

“It’ll be a long evening,” Chase said, “but one we’ll remember all our lives.”

One way or another, she noted silently. “Wait a minute. Didn’t you tell me this was a costume party? I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Lisa,” he said with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “do I look like the type of man who’d wear a costume?”

“Check,” she said with a curt nod. “that’s for the others. You and I will dress as yuppies.”

He smiled, but didn’t reply. “I’ll be presenting the new line to the clients as soon as the press arrives. When I introduce you, will you say a few words?”

Lisa gasped. “Absolutely not! That’s for you and the advertising agency to handle. But never fear. I’ll be right there to cheer and applaud.”

“You’re a lot of help.”

“I know,” she replied sweetly. “What time shall I expect you to pick me up?”

“I’ll be at your apartment by seven. The party won’t start until eight, so that’ll give us a chance to make sure everything’s going okay. I’ve had the large boardroom on the second floor opened for the occasion. It’s the largest room in the complex and adjoins a lounge the size of the plant’s cafeteria. We’ve set up a refreshment counter, and there are plenty of places for people to sit and relax.”

“I’ve never seen those rooms.”

Actually, that’s the reason I want to arrive early. *I have* seen them, and they were a mess. I hope the cleaning crew and caterers can work a miracle.”



Lisa picked up her purse from the desk and paused in the doorway. "Thanks for giving me the afternoon off. I'm going home to rest. I probably won't get much sleep tonight."

"You can count on that," he assured her. "I'm going to make one last telephone call before I leave. I'll see you tonight."

Instead of driving directly to her apartment, Lisa decided to stop at a shopping center in Ogden. The more she thought about it, the more obvious it had become that tonight's occasion merited more than a new pair of pantyhose. Two hours later, with a gorgeous winter white knit dress wrapped carefully in a box, she headed home.

There was no time for a nap, though she knew she'd regret the lack of one later that evening. She was determined to look her best. With meticulous care, she styled her hair, polished her nails, and applied her makeup. When she heard a knock on the door, she surveyed her appearance in the mirror one last time. Her dress was perfect, but the silver earrings didn't match her gold belt.

"One minute," she yelled, searching for her gold earrings. Chase had to see her looking just right.

Like a quick-change artist, she made the last-minute adjustments and took another look. No, silver accessories would look better with the dress. She tossed the gold belt aside and put on the silver one. Now she had to change her earrings again! She pulled off the gold earrings once more, then couldn't find the silver ones.

The knocking, more insistent this time, sounded again. "Just a second," she called.

She found one earring, put it on her right ear, and giving up on the other one, draped her hair over the other ear. "Okay."

She opened the door and gasped. En-

cased in a stinky costume that covered all but his face, Chase stood smiling. He was wearing a maroon velvet sports coat and a strange silky hood. "Hi there!" he greeted her. "You flunked the test. Remember when I asked if I seemed the type who would wear a costume? Well, a year ago I wouldn't have, but things have changed. Those were my B.L. days."

"Your what?"

He handed her a hanger. A large plastic bag covered the contents. "My before Lisa days."

She stared at his costume—the maroon jacket, yellow and brown striped pants, and silky hood. "You're Mr. Sugar-cane," she exclaimed.

"That's one point for the lady!" he said enthusiastically.

She glanced at the large lumpy costume on the hanger. "And I'm supposed to be Ms. Sugar Beet?" She glanced down at her carefully chosen outfit and sighed. Men. They were impossible.

"It'll be good advertising." Chase laughed. "Besides, I never dressed up in a costume until you taught me that it's never too late to start enjoying life."

"Right." With a sigh, she gestured for him to make himself comfortable in the living room. "I'll go change."

Twenty minutes later, Lisa ambled out of the bedroom. The heavily padded costume accentuated Ms. Beet's bizarre figure. The sixty-inch bust tapered into a forty inch waist, then narrowed down to extremely thin hips. "I've got good news and bad news," she announced.

Chase, who had been laughing the minute she stepped out of the bedroom, controlled himself long enough to say, "Let's have the good news first."

"You won't have to worry about anyone making a pass at me tonight."

Chase began to laugh again. "Good. I'll have you all to myself." With a chuckle he added, "And I do mean *all*."

He tried to give her a hug, but he couldn't get his arms around her.

She deliberately bumped him away with her padded bust. "The bad news is that we'll probably be arrested before we even get to the party. How do you intend to drive in a costume that restricts the movements of your head to no more than a few inches?"

"I've rented a limousine, sweetheart. I told you, we're going all out to make this an evening we'll remember for the rest of our lives."

And if the buyers hated the line, she wouldn't even be capable of running away, Lisa realized with a wry smile. She could, however, sit on anyone who dared criticize their inventions. That would certainly teach them a lesson they'd never forget!

Lisa and Chase tried walking hand in hand down the hall, but her costume's ample proportions made that very difficult. Marching in single file, they headed for the limousine.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the Sanger complex, where the party was just starting. It had taken her so long to get into the Ms. Beet costume that Chase's hopes of arriving early had been dashed.

Seeing everyone else's costumes, Lisa began to feel more at ease. At least the others looked as crazy as she and Chase did.

"The invitations suggested that our guests come dressed as something that can be found on a farm or in a country store," Chase explained as they began to greet the guests. "That ties in with Ms. Sugar Beet and with the fact that Halloween is harvest time."

Lisa recognized some of Chase's relatives, with whom they exchanged quick greetings. The family had obviously planned their costumes carefully, although they had taken creative license in

interpreting the restrictions on costumes.

Eventually everyone gathered in the large boardroom, which had been thoroughly cleaned and skillfully decorated to resemble a feed store. Cages contained brightly painted ceramic chickens; corn stalks, bales of hay, and a fresh vegetable stand had been set up in the center where musicians dressed as farmhands played guitars and fiddles.

Once the party was in full swing, Chase walked to a raised platform in the front of the room and spoke into a microphone. "As you can see from my costume and that of our designer, Lisa Fleming," he began—Lisa managed a thin smile as he pointed her out to the crowd—"this year Sanger is celebrating something very special. We're introducing a new line of toys for girls." In some detail Chase went on to describe the Ms. Sugar Beet line.

Lisa's anxiety began to fade as the reporters laughed good-naturedly in response to Chase's explanation of the Dressings, the Beep, and Mr. Sugar-cane. The prototypes for the toys were passed around the room.

Within minutes, buyers and reporters were shouting questions. Were any of the toys available for immediate sale? Could they purchase them for their own children? Several clients whom Lisa recognized as toy distributors began to gather around Chase, insisting they be allowed to place their orders immediately, thereby assuring themselves of a good supply during the Christmas season.

By the time Chase rejoined her, Lisa felt like cheering. "They like it, Chase. We did it!"

One of the distributors, a tall, balding man dressed as a scarecrow, demanded everyone's attention and presented Chase with a plaque. "Your aunts asked me to judge the costumes," he explained.

Chase sent Lisa a furtive sideways glance, the best he could manage in the

restrictive costume.

"And," the scarecrow continued, "I have decided that the award for best costume goes to you two."

During a hearty round of applause, amid flashing camera bulbs, Chase accepted the plaque and handed it to Lisa. "I want you to keep it for us, since you're primarily responsible for the creation of Ms. Sugar Beet."

Lisa accepted it. "We'll put it in our office. After all, the costumes were your idea, so it's only fair we share the honors."

Meanwhile, one of Chase's aunts coerced the musicians into playing a lively country western song, then got everyone involved in an impromptu square dance.

Chase took Lisa's arm and gently guided her into the hall. "Alone at last!"

"Isn't it wonderful?" Lisa exclaimed. "Chase, all the dreams and hopes we've shared are coming true!" Chase looked positively silly in his costume, yet his nearness affected her in a familiar and distracting way.

"Not all of them. At least, not yet." He paused, as if searching for the right words. "Lisa, nothing's more important to me than you are. I think the time has come for us to make a permanent commitment."

She held her breath. "Are you proposing?"

"Yes." He smiled and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "What do you say?"

She stepped toward him, ready to slip into his arms, but the heavy padding of her costume knocked him backwards. "This is the most wonderful moment of my life, and I can't even get near you!" she wailed.

"Was that a yes?" he asked, laughing.

"Of course." She stretched, trying to wrap her arms around him, but her costume stuck out too far. She groaned in frustration. "If you could kiss me, this moment would be perfect."

"Stay very still," he warned. He stepped beside her and leaned sideways. "I love you," he murmured, covering her mouth with his own.

The adoring intensity of his kiss sent a ripple of pleasure coursing through her. Suddenly, flashing cameras illuminated the corridor.

"Look at this," one reporter called to the others. "We've got a great story here! Did Mr. Sugarcane just propose to Ms. Sugar Beet?"

Chase laughed. "You bet he did. In fact, you can end by saying that they lived happily ever after." ♥

---

## ARE YOU MOVING?

To be sure you don't miss a single issue mail this coupon today!  
(please print)

PLEASE ATTACH PRESENT MAILING LABEL IN BOX BELOW.

### NEW ADDRESS

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



# *Dillon's Promise*

---

*In wrenching grief Thea Kearney once sought comfort in roguish Dillon Cameron's arms. Now Dillon has come back to claim the child he's fathered, honor a deathbed promise, and capture Thea's heart.*

---

CINDA RICHARDS

---

Someone was on the roof. Thea Kearney stood listening intently, certain now of the faint scraping noise of metal against slate she heard above the eternal Orkney Island wind. She abruptly reached for her coat—Griffen's coat; it comforted her to wear it. She listened for a moment longer, then reassured herself that the baby quietly sleeping in the crib by the kitchen window had not been disturbed. Her hand reached down to caress the pale,

red-gold curls.

*Hair like your father's...*

The thought came unbidden, and she forced it aside, moving quickly to the back door. Even on balmy days the wind was almost constant, and Thea braced herself to step away from the protection of the cottage and its stone wall windbreaks so she could look onto the roof. The sun was in her eyes, and the wind whipped her skirt around her legs. The man didn't see her,

From DILLON'S PROMISE by Cinda Richards. Copyright © 1986 by Cinda Richards. Published by permission of The Berkley Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

continuing to work at fitting a missing piece of slate near the chimney. He was wearing an army field jacket with the collar turned up and a wool fisherman's cap pulled low over his forehead.

Cupping her mouth with her hands so she could be heard, Thea called, "What are you doing?"

"I'm fixing the roof," he called out, still not looking at her. His words were almost instantly snatched away by the wind.

"I don't want the roof fixed," Thea called up to him.

The man looked at her then.

*Dillon!* she thought wildly as she recognized him, involuntarily taking a step backward.

"I'm not doing it for you," he yelled back. "I'm doing it for Griffen."

"Griffen doesn't need your help now, Dillon!" she yelled. He didn't stop working.

Thea stood there a moment longer. Then she turned away, nearly falling in her rush to get back into the house.

She slammed the door shut behind her and leaned against it, her heart pounding.

"Dillon, what are you doing here?" she said aloud to herself. She had never expected to see him again. She glanced at the clock on the kitchen mantel. She had less than forty minutes before the Orkney Island Tourist Office sent her another B & B guest.

Her cottage was located on South Ronaldsay, on the outskirts of St. Margaret's Hope, and Griffen's love of modern conveniences had made it a much sought-after place now for bed and breakfast among the hikers, weekend archeologists, and bird watchers who found their way to the Orkney Islands from the Scottish mainland.

She took off Griffen's coat and tried to think what to do, coming once again to the crib to look at her sleeping child. "I

can't do anything," she whispered.

She looked up at the ceiling again, hearing him move around. At least she didn't have to worry about his staying here at the cottage as he had when Griffen was alive. The room was rented out. She hung Griffen's jacket on a peg by the back door. Caitlin would sleep for a little while yet, she thought as she went upstairs to the guest room.

The room was in order with all the little touches—a collection of Agatha Christie books, knitted afghans, and a high-backed rocking chair in front of a small stone fireplace. The iron bed boasted flannel sheets to keep out the dampness, and a crocheted bedspread she'd made herself.

She faltered a bit as she came back into the kitchen; Dillon was sitting at the table, his cap and jacket hung on a peg beside Griffen's. His compelling eyes were fixed on Thea.

"How are you keeping, Thea?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Dillon," she answered. She looked at him gravely, once again trying to reconcile Dillon's reputation with the Dillon she knew. To Griffen, Dillon Cameron had been a wonderful friend and a bit of a rogue—two-thirds silkie, Griffen had called him, because he was the very devil with women and because he was more at home in the sea than any mere human had the right to be. She remembered the two of them teasing her that Dillon's mother had been a Mac-Codrum, one of the Scottish clans that considered itself descended from a deceived human's marriage to a silkie, the mythical sea creature who was sometimes a man and sometimes a seal and always irresistible to women.

No one knew better than Thea about Dillon Cameron's irresistibility—Dillon, who had always been so quiet with her, who had rarely spoken to her out of Grif-

fen's presence, and who had helped her make the arrangements for Griffen's funeral. That had been nineteen months ago, nearly two years since Griffen Kearney died three hundred feet down in a North Sea oil field southeast of the Orkney's, and even his best friend—The Great Silkie, Dillon Cameron—hadn't been able to save him.

He was a big man; his presence filled the narrow kitchen. He was clean-shaven and fair-haired, but he wore his hair much too long, and that, along with his expensively nonchalant clothes, made him look more like a nineteenth-century poet than one of the rowdy divers from the oil rig crews. She supposed that when one made what amounted to two thousand dollars a week diving, one simply *had* to spend it on something—like the cashmere fisherman's sweater and the baggy designer trousers he was wearing.

"How much do I owe you for the roof?" she asked abruptly.

"Thea, don't," he said.

Caitlin was waking and fretful, and Thea turned away from him. "I don't want you here, Dillon," she said as she reached into the crib to take her child into her arms.

"I thought you'd go back to America," he said.

"I'm sure you did," she answered, "You always thought the way of life here would be too much for a —a *spoiled* American. You've been expecting me to go since the day I married Griffen."

"Why haven't you?" he persisted. "Your family is there." His voice was deep and gritty with the "burred" r's of the Scots accent. He got up and walked closer. "Are you not... lonesome here, Thea?"

"No," she said stiffly. And if she were, she had no intention of admitting it to him.

"The winters are stormy and long," he

said, his pale gray-blue eyes probing hers. Or were they green? she wondered. He had eyes like the sea, always changing.

"I don't mind," she said. "And I keep busy."

"By taking strangers into Griffen's house?" he asked.

Her temper flared. "I take them in because I have to."

"What have you done with Griffen's insurance money then?"

"There isn't any insurance money!" Thea snapped. "Most of it went to his father, with some in trust for his grandmother."

"Why would he do that? His dad will drink it all."

"How should I know? And it's really none of your business, Dillon."

But Dillon wouldn't leave it alone. "You've enough to live on?"

"If I take in B&B's from the Tourist Office," she said sharply, and he gave a tired exhalation of breath.

"Why haven't you gone home?" he asked again.

"This is my home, Dillon. I like it here," she said as she placed Caitlin on the floor to play.

Dillon suddenly smiled.

"You find that funny?"

"No," he said, still smiling. "I was thinking of something Griffen said about the cairns. 'Everybody who comes here sees a cold pile of stones,' he said. 'My Theas sees the warm, living folk that brought them.'"

Thea felt the sudden pang of Griffen's absence in a way she hadn't in a long time.

"I miss him, too, Thea," Dillon said, as if he sensed her pain.

She turned her head sharply at the sound of a car, breathing a sigh of relief. "You'll have to excuse me now, Dillon," she said. "That's my B&B from the Tourist Office."

"No," he said, catching her by the

arm. "I'm your paying guest."

She pulled her arm free, panicked by the memories his warm, firm touch evoked. "The girl at the Tourist Office said D. Smith—"

"Don't you think I know you wouldn't rent to an incomer named D. Cameron?" he asked, ignoring the woman who now knocked on the door.

"Dillon, will you let me get by?" Thea said sharply.

"There are things we have to settle, Thea."

"No," she said firmly. "Dillon, get out of my way!"

The woman knocked for the second time.

"I think I'd better handle this," he said. "She's followed me here, Thea. She's a bit—impulsive."

Thea stared into his gray-green eyes, finally understanding. He was the rake she'd always heard he was after all, and this was one of his women. She moved aside to let him answer the door.

She kept glancing at the back door, expecting Dillon to bring the woman inside. He didn't, and Thea couldn't keep from leaning closer to the window over the sink to see them. They were standing near the back door, out of the wind, the woman with her arms folded in an attitude of stubborn defiance. The woman was quite pretty, her platinum-blond hair worn in a straight but artfully mussed geometrical cut.

Dillon moved to open the car door for the woman, but she wouldn't get in.

Thea forced herself to move away from the window. This was ridiculous. She didn't care in the least what Dillon Cameron was doing. She picked up Caitlin and set her in the highchair and opened a jar of strained peaches.

A car finally started, and Thea waited for Dillon to walk by the window, but he didn't, and she finally got up to see.

The car was gone, and so was Dillon.



The baby went to sleep peacefully for the night, leaving Thea nothing to do but worry and remember. She took a hot bath and put on a long blue flannel nightgown. Before the fireplace in her parlor, she sat staring into the fire, savoring the acid fragrance of burning peat.

Wind-scoured and sea-wracked, this island was nothing like the place near the South Carolina coast she had once called home. She had grown up in a small tobacco-growing community along secondary Highway 9, a quiet alternative backroad for thousands of people who flocked to the beach resorts every summer. In her family a vacation was canning tomatoes instead of suckering tobacco, and it was to these travelers, Thea supposed, that she owed her emigration to Scotland.

She hadn't intended to emigrate at first, of course; she had only wanted to travel, instead of always standing by the side of the road watching other people go. She had been twenty-four years old and had a job with a title—Developmental Director for a small arts council—before she could afford it. The tour was called "The Wild Highlands of Scotland," and it promised crofters, lochs, solitary islands, and quiet moors. She had gone to Scotland in search of a new adventure, but what she found was Griffen Michael Kearney, a red-bearded diver for an off-shore oil rig in the North Atlantic.

Thea found herself firmly entangled in Griffen's life in a matter of days, a life that included Dillon Cameron, the daring boyhood friend who had talked Griffen into becoming a diver in the first place. It rather surprised Thea that these opposite men were friends at all. Dillon had a reputation for fast cars and faster women, while Griffen manfully assumed responsibility for looking after his usually inebriate father and psychic grandmother.



Thea smiled to herself. Griffen, the kind and caring Scotsman she'd loved and married—she still loved him after six years of marriage and nearly two years of widowhood, but in a quiet, gentle way now:

She hadn't cried when the company officials came to tell her that Griffen had been killed. Emotionally, it was as if she were in a secret, windowless room, shut away in the dark. She knew that Dillon had come to help her, just as she knew that Flora and Roddy Macnab were there and that most of St. Margaret's Hope would gather to comfort her as she struggled through the ordeal of saying goodbye to the man she loved.

But she hadn't been able to cry, and Thea knew that her friends worried about it. They fretted over her with offers of tea and food, and all the while she hid in her secret room.

She was alone when the walls to that room began to crumble, alone except for Dillon.

She had been sitting before the fireplace that night, too, her mind numb and cold. She could hear the wind, always the wind, and Dillon moving quietly about from window to window like some wild thing hearing a call it couldn't answer.

"Will you take tea now?" he asked her suddenly. He'd removed the jacket to his expensive gray suit, so fashionably appropriate for the funeral service earlier. "I have some ready. It will make you sleep."

"I don't want to sleep," Thea said, momentarily hating his warm aliveness and his concern.

"Thea..."

"I don't want any tea! I don't want anything!"

He hesitated, then went back toward the kitchen. She found suddenly that there was something she wanted after all.

"Dillon," she called after him, and he

turned to look at her, his face neutral. "Tell me what happened."

"Thea, you know what happened," he said wearily.

"I don't want the company version. I want to know what happened to Griffen. I want you to tell me."

He took a long breath, and he avoided her eyes. She knew he was hurting—just as she was—but she didn't care.

"We...were out...Griffen and Sinclair and I," he began, but he didn't go on.

"Sinclair," she prompted. "Sinclair is young."

"Yes," Dillon said, his voice strained. "He's...young. Do you know how it is at all, Thea? The long shifts—twenty or thirty days of getting into the diving bell and having to go down—and then coming up and having to stay in the pressure chamber. We...live on top of each other. The sea and the gloom—the light doesn't shine very far, Thea, and everything still presses you down—closes you in. You're never away from it—that feeling of being closed in..."

Thea looked away from him. The wind outside made a low, mournful sound.

"I...didn't know how bad it was for Sinclair," Dillon said.

"No," she said, staring at him across the room. "You were never afraid, were you, Dillon? You're The Great Silkie—half man and half seal. You weren't like Sinclair. Like Griffen."

"Griffen wasn't afraid," Dillon said, but Thea could hear the edge of doubt in his voice.

"He was. Griffen was a farmer, Dillon. All he wanted was his island land, and you showed him how to get the money for it. Go on. Tell me what happened."

He stared back at her, but she didn't waver. His sea-colored eyes searched hers for some way out.

"Dillon, please!"

"We were . . . clearing the way for the pipe," he said, looking back at her. "We had to cut a piece out and rejoin it. Sinclair was welding, but he . . . couldn't stand any more of it. Griffen was trying to hold on to him. Sinclair was mad to get to the surface. He couldn't come up without decompressing in the pressure chamber—he would have died of the bends. Griffen had him, but the boy still had the torch. The hotwater line in Griffen's suit was nicked."

He faltered, then looked directly into her eyes. "It's so cold down that far, Thea."

Thea understood what he didn't say. So cold—cold enough to freeze in a matter of minutes. "You . . . just forgot all about Sinclair."

Dillon took a long time to answer. "No," he said finally. "I didn't know Griffen was in trouble. We were three hundred feet down—the both of us trying to hold on to that half-crazed boy! I didn't know!"

"You tried," she repeated. "You didn't let Sinclair keep you from trying."

"Ah, God, Thea!" Dillon cried, going blindly away from her toward the back door. She followed him to the alcove just inside the back entrance.

"Dillon," she said quietly, and the wind hammered against the back door. "Tell me. There's no peace for either of us if you don't! Please, Dillon—please!"

"I was the senior diver, and I was going to have to choose—" His voice broke. "Griffen knew," he began again. "I . . . couldn't bring them both into the diving bell. He knew I couldn't, and he—"

"Dillon, tell me!" she cried when he didn't go on.

"He made the decision for me, Thea! He wouldn't let go of Sinclair and let him kill himself trying to surface. It was my responsibility—mine. But he . . .

wouldn't let the boy go up."

Yes, Thea thought sadly. Griffen would do that.

She stood staring at Dillon, wanting to hate him. She couldn't do it. She understood now what Griffen had done—not only for Sinclair, but for Dillon, the man who had been his best friend all of his life. That's how much he'd loved Dillon.

"I'm so . . . sorry, Thea," Dillon said.

She could see a single tear running slowly from his eye. She put her hand on his arm, and his shoulders sagged. He was holding her suddenly, the anguished sound he made against her ear releasing her own pent-up grief, and they cried together.

Then, as she struggled for control, her lips brushed against his face, grazing the corner of his mouth.

It was as if she had burned him. He stiffened, visibly shaken by the force of his response to her touch. Then his mouth was on hers, his arms around her. She had never in her life known a passion so abrupt and so intense, and she did nothing to resist it.

The next morning he was gone, leaving her no word of apology or regret or farewell, and she'd heard nothing from him until today.

"This is not doing anybody any good," she said abruptly, pulling her thoughts back into the present. "Least of all, me." She banked the fire and turned off the lights, walking down the narrow hallway to the bedroom and the small room across from it where Caitlin slept.

Dillon was standing by the baby's crib, his sweater and trousers now soaking wet and dripping puddles on the floor.

Thea quietly released the breath she was holding. "How did you get in here?" she asked. She listened for the sound of a car, wondering what he'd done with his blond sidekick. No, she thought. He

hadn't come by car. He was too wet from the rain.

"Griffen... gave me a key," Dillon said finally. "She's very beautiful," he added. He reached down to gently touch the baby's hair, his movements unsteady.

"Dillon, are you drunk?" she asked in spite of herself.

"I'm... a bit full, Thea," he admitted uneasily.

"You can be 'a bit full' someplace else," she said leading him by the arm away from the baby.

"I... don't make a habit of it," he said defensively, taking a few steps. "We were drinking... Griffen's health tonight. He wanted it," Dillon rambled on. "And, you know, a fine gathering it was, Thea. Singin' and dancin' and toasts to our Griffen—*Slainte Mhor, Mo Craid!*" he said loudly by way of demonstration. "Great health, my friend!"

"Dillon, will you be quiet!"

"No, I think not, Thea. You've been quiet enough for the both of us." He leaned toward her, and she frowned at the whisky fumes. "I want my baby," he whispered, and she stiffened.

"Dillon, you're drunk."

"Aye," he agreed. "I am. But I still know, Thea. I know that wee baby girl is mine. What I don't know is how you could have my child and not tell me."

"Dillon, she's not—" Thea stopped.

"Thank you for that, at least," he said. "You can't look me in the face and deny..."

"Dillon—" She tried to get him out of the room again.

"I know that child is mine, Thea," he said, turning her sharply around so she was facing the crib. "She is so beautiful," he said again, his voice going soft. "My *ochter*."

"Dillon, I'm about out of patience with you," Thea said, trying a different tactic. He stumbled, and she tried to keep him

upright. "Dillon, could you pick up your feet?" she asked.

"Aye! I will!" And he did—approximately.

She finally heaved him into the guest room, all but forcing him in the direction she wanted him to go. Then he sat down on the bed before she wanted him to sit. "Dillon!" she snapped. He was soaking wet and sitting on her hand-crocheted bedspread.

"Give me your sweater," she said, abandoning the idea of moving him and trying something else instead. She tried not to look at his bare chest as he removed it, tried not to acknowledge what a beautiful man he was. Sweater off, he fell back heavily on the bed.

"Dillon!" she said, still worried about the bedspread. She tried not to look at him again, tried not to remember.

"You're not smiling, Thea," he said, his eyes closed.

She didn't answer him. "Roll over, Dillon," she said, trying to get the spread off the bed. Her nostrils filled with his scent: soap and sea air and whisky.

"You're not smiling," he said again.

"To tell you the truth, Dillon," she said matter-of-factly, "I feel a lot more like crying."

He reached for her suddenly, catching her by the shoulders and holding on. She could feel his warm hands through the flannel nightgown. "No, Thea," he said urgently. "There's nothing for you to be crying about." He awkwardly tried to caress her face. "My beautiful Thea," he whispered.

"I'm not beautiful, and I'm not yours," she said, trying to dodge his hand.

"You are," he insisted. "Sweet... and beautiful... and mine, Thea. Griffen gave you to me."

"Dillon, go to sleep!" She caught both of his hands in hers, pressing them against

his bare chest as if she thought they'd stay there, but he reached for her immediately..

"Thea, we have to talk," he insisted.

She slipped free of his grasp and fled the room, hearing him call her once as she reached the ground floor.

---

Thea woke to the sound of voices in the kitchen.

"Ah, no, lass," the male voice insisted. "Don't feed your poor old Da the porridge—he's not up to porridge this morning, lass. Now you have a wee bit."

There was a brief silence, and then, "Da!" in the baby's high-pitched voice.

Thea didn't stop to hunt for her robe, bursting into the kitchen just as Dillon fed Caitlin another spoonful.

"Here's your mum now," he said to the baby. "Good morning, Thea. Did you have a good sleep?"

"Did I—!" Thea cried, making him wince from the hangover he must have. "What do you think you're doing? What are you giving her?"

"Porridge," Dillon said. "Oatmeal," he clarified. "And some orange juice."

"Where did you get orange juice? There's no orange juice here!"

"Well, we've been a few places," he said, visibly bracing himself for another outburst.

"We *who*?" Thea asked, her voice deadly.

"The lass here," he said, "and me. You didn't tell me her name," he reminded her.

"Never mind that! What places?"

"To Roddy Macnab's."

"Roddy Macnab's!" Thea cried, as if it were a hotbed of wickedness instead of the post office-grocery store.

"Aye," Dillon said reasonably. "The little one here asked me to," he added.

"She *asked*—" Thea said, faltering as the ridiculousness of the statement

penetrated. She glanced at the baby, who promptly grinned. Wherever they had been, the baby was none the worse for wear.

Thea stared from one guilty party to the other, completely incredulous at Dillon Cameron's audacity. But she was losing the edge to her anger in the face of the two identical grins she was confronting.

"She knows who I am," Dillon offered, and Thea's temper flared again.

"She doesn't know who you are," she said tersely.

"She calls me 'Da'," he insisted.

"Da!" the baby said as if on cue.

"That isn't you. That's a—a non-specific *d* sound all babies make at this age."

"Da!" the baby said again, this time holding up both arms for Dillon to take her.

Dillon stood quietly. "Do you think, Thea, it would be all right if her... non-specific *d* sound picked her up?"

"No!" Thea said.

"At least until you put on some clothes," he suggested.

Her blue flannel nightgown was hardly revealing, but Dillon's calling attention to it made it seem unbearably inappropriate. "I'll be right back," she said. "And don't either of you go anywhere!"

Oh, Lord, she thought as she caught sight of herself in the dresser mirror.

She finally got her hair into some order by twining it into a long braid she let hang down her back. She put on a mauve-colored sweater and dragged on her usual pair of jeans so Dillon wouldn't think she was going to any special trouble on his behalf. Then she promptly gave in to her vanity by putting on lip gloss.

"Dillon, we need to talk," she began as soon as she came into the kitchen.

"Aye," he said agreeably. His eyes traveled over her with interest, and the baby sat happily on his knee, looking at

him adoringly.

*I knew she'd love him*, Thea thought in dismay.

"There's a gale coming," Dillon said. "I got some groceries, too, while we were out, so you won't have to take the baby into the rain."

"You walked into Roddy Macnab's with my baby and you bought me groceries?" Thea said, her incredulity returning. "Flora and Roddy—what are they going to think? Half the village hangs out in there! You can't just go buying groceries with Caitlin in your arms!"

Dillon smiled. "Caitlin, is it?" he said, reaching up to caress the baby's hair. "My wee Katy," he added softly.

"She is not your 'wee Katy'! And you had no right to take her into Roddy Macnab's!"

"Thea, for godsake! Do you think for a minute Roddy and every other man, woman, and child on this island doesn't know how you got her? I'm her dad, and they know it. And if they didn't know it, I'd tell them. As it is, Thea, I've missed an important part of her life, and it's going to take me a while to get over it!"

"Oh, God," Thea waited.

"Thea, it's not that bad," Dillon insisted.

"It is!"

"No, it isn't! Thea. I've come to marry you."

She stopped dead, staring at him as if he were surely out of his mind. "Why on God's green earth would *you* want to marry *me*?"

"You know, Thea, I'm having some trouble knowing why you'd ask that—with you looking right at me and I've got Katy on my lap."

"Dillon—" she started, looking into his eyes in spite of herself. She reached out to touch the baby, who promptly grinned from her secure perch in her father's arms. "Our being together shouldn't have

happened. Still, there's no reason to ruin both our lives because of it. I don't want anything from you. You don't have to concern yourself—"

"Don't concern myself?" he interrupted. "She's mine, Thea."

"No, Dillon. She's *mine*. What do you want here?"

"I've said. I want to marry you."

"No, thank you. Now, why don't you just go back to Aberdeen or wherever you hang out when you're not diving. I'm sure there must be someone somewhere who would be just delighted to see you."

"I intend to 'hang out' here. I want to stay here until my next shift."

"Dillon, look. Why don't you just tell me what you want? I really don't need anything from you. I release you from all moral, legal, and financial obligations."

"Thea—" Dillon said. He hesitated, and she could feel him struggling for control. "Don't do this, Thea. Don't pretend there's nothing between us. You know it's only the guilt that's kept us apart—you doing your penance for what happened with me. We have Katy, but there's more than that. I've spent every day of the last nineteen months thinking of it, of us, Thea. We've been punished long enough—the both of us."

She frowned and didn't comment.

"Thea? Are you going to marry me?"

She laughed. "Dillon, Dillon, if I said yes, you'd keel over in a dead faint."

"Oh, aye," he admitted. "But when I revived, we'd go to the church, Thea."

"No, thank you, Dillon. I'm really not your type. What you need is one of those wholesome, fun-loving soft drink, beer people."

"My God, what is that? A soft drink beer person?"

"You see them on American television. They ride their bicycles off the dock and into the lake and squirt each other with hoses—so you'll know what free spirits

they are—and drink the right beverage. You need a woman like that, Dillon.”

“I’ll admit to a certain rowdiness, Thea, but I’ve not ridden my bicycle into the loch.” He put Caitlin easily over his shoulder. “It sounds a bit odd if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she answered. “But that seems a strange remark coming from the man who sang ‘The Quaker’s Wife’ a *capella* on Charlie platform—naked.” She glanced at him, enjoying his stunned look.

“Who told you that?”

“Griffen, of course. Among other things.”

“What other things?”

She tried not to grin. “Oh,” she said airily, “probably all of them. The female fiddle-player from the Royal Highland Fiddlers—and her mother. Oh, yes, and the little French bird watcher. Now, there’s a lusty story.”

“God,” Dillon said under his breath, and Thea looked up from the bottle of formula she was about to pour. “They don’t call me The *Great* Silkie for naught, Thea,” he said in his own defense.

“No,” she said wryly. “I never for a moment thought they did.”

“Could I feed Katy?” he asked.

“Do you know how?”

“Aye. My mother was a nanny, and I’m the oldest of six. Thea, I wish you wouldn’t look at me like you think I’m on the wrong side of the law and you expect Scotland Yard to bash the door in any second.”

“Somebody’s irate father, more likely,” Thea said idly.

“I’ve lived a man’s life, Thea, but no lass has ever been the worse for knowing me. Except—”

“Who?” she asked.

“I was going to say you,” he said, looking down at his daughter. He was completely at ease feeding her. “You don’t

despise me, do you, Thea?”

“Why would you think that?”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “You didn’t tell me about her. I’m still trying to find out why.”

Thea didn’t comment.

“Do you blame me for Griffen’s death?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“What then?”

“Dillon, I thought you wouldn’t care!” Thea said sharply. “And I just couldn’t handle that, too!”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, turning his attention to Caitlin again. “I want to thank you,” he murmured without looking up, “for taking such good care of my daughter.”

“I wanted my child, Dillon.”

“Aye. I only wanted you to know that I... I thank you. She’s beautiful, and she’s merry—like you. Thea?”

“What, Dillon?”

“Last night, was I... a beast or anything?”

“No more so than usual,” she said dryly.

“Well, that’s something then, isn’t it? I mean if you don’t despise me and I wasn’t a beast, then I was hoping you wouldn’t send me away now that I’m sober and now there’s a gale blowing. I’ve twelve days, Thea, until I go back diving. I want you to let me stay here. As your B&B guest. I’ll abide by the same rules. I just want to get to know my baby. I want her to know who I am. She’s my daughter, Thea. I want no bad feelings between us. Can you do that—let me stay?”

“Or what?” she asked quietly.

He understood, and he didn’t pretend otherwise. “If it comes to a legal battle,” he said, “here or in America, you know I can afford it.”

Thea gave a small laugh. “Well done! Subtle but appropriately threatening.”

“She’s my daughter,” he said again.

"Yes, and you've got me with my back to the wall, don't you? Dillon, I don't want her learning to love you and then have you disappear."

"Thea, she's not some grand new toy I've found to amuse myself with until I find something better."

Thea made no reply. Caitlin was sleeping soundly now, and she looked at her baby's lovely face.

She knew that now was the time for Dillon to grow tired of being a father, now while Caitlin was too young to understand. It was herself that she was worried about.

She breathed a long sigh. She was going to have to do it. For Caitlin. It was the only way to keep her from being hurt. The sooner Dillon tired of family life and went back to his fiddle-players and bird watchers and geometrical blondes, the better.

"You have twelve days?" she said abruptly, looking again into his eyes.

"Aye."

"All right. You can stay. Until your next shift."

She had taken him by surprise, and it took a moment for him to recover.

"Good...good, then," he said. "You'll never repent it—letting me be here."



That night Thea lay in her bed listening, is aware of Dillon's presence in the cottage as if he'd been lying beside her instead of being a floor away. She tried to find a position that was conducive to sleep, but sleep eluded her.

At some point Caitlin began to fret and Thea sat up on the side of the bed. But the fretting diminished, then stopped, giving way to a softly singing baritone voice. Dillon had her.

Thea walked quietly to the nursery doorway. She could just make out Caitlin's small head resting on Dillon's shoulder while he rocked and quietly sang

in Gaelic.

"I'll take this turn," he said quietly when he saw her in the doorway. "I'm not sleeping—still on the oil rig time, I think. You sleep. You haven't had a chance to do that in a long time, have you?"

"No," she admitted.

"Sleep, then. She's only cranky about her gums. You go and rest. I'll call if we need you. I promise. I always keep my promises, Thea."

"The song you're singing," she abruptly asked. "What is it? A lullaby?"

"No, lass. It's no lullaby. It's... about a man and a woman. It's about a... woman who says no and the man who knows she doesn't mean it. He knows, for all her pride, she'll follow anywhere he leads, and he knows she'll lie with him, for all her firm farewells."

Thea could feel him smiling in the dark, and she went blindly out of the room and back to her bed, listening all the while to the soft words of Dillon's song. He had a fine singing voice that dragged up the longing of the haunting ballad he'd chosen for—

Not for Caitlin. For her. She lay in the dark, eyes open, her heart pounding.

The song stopped. She heard him leave the nursery, and she held her breath as he passed her open door. Did he hesitate? She wasn't sure.

His footsteps continued down the hall, and her heart lurched at another sound. The back door opening, and Dillon going out in the middle of a North Sea gale.

She was out of bed instantly, running barefooted into the nursery.

*He wouldn't take her!*

Caitlin lay quietly sleeping in her crib, and Thea clung to the rail, trying to stop trembling.

He worked so handily at getting her to let him stay here, just so he could leave. She moved restlessly to the window, but she couldn't see anything but blackness.



No woman's ever been the worse for knowing me, he'd said. That's it, Thea thought. The woman who had followed him here. She must still be on the island, at the hotel or some other B&B. If this was her first storm, she must be terrified. Dillon wouldn't leave her like that. He'd go to her. He'd tease her until she was laughing and not afraid anymore, and then he'd make love—

*Stop it!* What was the matter with her? Dillon Cameron was nothing to her or she to him, except for Caitlin. And she was going to have to remember that.

---

Thea had the finely honed sense of a person who lived alone. So how did this keep happening? She hadn't heard Dillon come back and here he was, asleep in the guest room in the middle of the afternoon.

"I have got to get that key back," she said under her breath.

She stood in the doorway, shamelessly watching him sleep. He was a sprawler, taking up most of the bed, and the sheet covered him only minimally. Quite clearly, he preferred sleeping in . . . nothing. She left abruptly, chiding herself all the way down the stairs. What was the matter with her? She had better things to do than to stand there drooling, for godsake!

She checked on Caitlin's napping, then went into the small laundry room off the kitchen to get an ever-present basket of clean baby clothes to put away.

"Thea?" Dillon said from behind her.

Thea had never been a screamer, but the shriek she let fly was loud and long.

"Bloody hell!" Dillon shouted. "Thea, are you daft? You've scared the life out of me!"

"I scared you!" she shouted back at him. He was wearing jeans that were zipped but not buttoned, and he was barefooted. "Dillon, stop slinking around!"

"I'm not slinking! I just came to see

what you wanted."

"I don't want anything!" she cried, gathering up spilled baby clothes. She pushed by him, heading toward the kitchen with him right behind her.

"Well, you must want something. You came up to the room just now!"

"I didn't know you were in the room, you idiot! You didn't bother to let me know you'd come back!"

They glared at each other until Dillon sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

"I've had sharks tap me on the shoulder, and they've not scared me as bad as you did," he said reproachfully.

"What are you doing?" he added.

"Listening to see if you woke Caitlin."

"I'm not the one who screeched!"

"Well, you're the one yelling his head off now!"

"I had the provocation!" he cried.

Thea abruptly grinned. His hair was all mussed. She really had scared him, and he was embarrassed by his un-silkie-like behavior.

"You think this is funny," he accused her.

"Not very," she lied.

Dillon got up from the table, and Thea tried not to look at his trim waist and his bare chest.

"I've had my heart stopped, and you laugh at me. I make the best marriage proposal I know how to make, and you laugh at me."

"Dillon, what can I say?"

"I'm surprised you ever found the time to get to Scotland. It's amazing you weren't too busy watching nitwit American television shows—"

"Nitwit American?" she asked, eyebrows raised. "'Benny Hill!'" she countered.

"The Newlywed Game!" he said, not to be outdone.

"We'd better stop while we're ahead here. The next thing you know we'll be in-

to it about sacred cows like baseball and soccer. And then you'll make some crack about the way I make tea, at which point, sir, you will be out of here on your can, see?"

Dillon looked her over thoughtfully. "You're not big enough to put me anywhere on my can, Thea," he said.

"Cameron," Thea said with a soft sigh, "you're going to rue the day you ever said that."

"Am I, Thea?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. You see, I know something about you..."

"And what's that?" He was grinning because she was advancing slowly around the table.

It occurred to her briefly that she probably shouldn't be doing this. What the hell, she thought. No woman had ever gotten the best of him, and it was high time.

She feigned a few assault moves while he chuckled at her feeble attempts. Finally, she rushed him in a halfhearted tackle. He easily subdued her, catching her up in his arms and holding her against his bare chest.

"What was that you were saying, Thea Kearney?" he asked, infinitely sure of himself.

"I was saying, Dillon," she began quietly, arranging her face so that it was properly contrite, "that I know... where The Great Silkie is... *ticklish*!" she finished in a rush of flying fingers along his bare ribs.

"Thea! God! Thea!" he cried, trying to get free of her tickling. "You keep at it, and I'll drop you!"

"I don't mind," she said, wriggling the fingers he had clamped against his side with his elbow. He dropped her, but she hooked her foot behind his knee, sending him sprawling nearly on top of her. They were both laughing, their faces close, until Dillon abruptly let her go, rolling over on-

to his back.

"Uncle," he said weakly, still trying to get his breath. He turned his head to look at her. "God, but you're a daft woman!" he said, breaking into laughter again, and Thea laughed with him, fully aware of how long it had been since she'd done anything this, well, *daft*.

"Thea," he said, his soft Scots voice making her look into his eyes. "I would have come to you if I'd known," he said quietly. "You know that, don't you?" he insisted, his eyes gray now. "You know I would have come if you'd wanted me."

"No," she said, shaking her head. She pulled free of his grasp. "I didn't know."

"Thea—"

"I have to see about Caitlin," she said.

Caitlin was awake and side-stepping around her crib, looking up to grin as Thea came in, a grin that was all too familiar now. Strange, Thea thought, how she hadn't noticed long ago that their smiles were so much alike. But then, she hadn't seen them together before now.

She put the baby into a clean pair of rompers, letting her down to make her own way along the hall into the kitchen.

"Da!" Caitlin squealed as she made her way to Dillon.

Dillon had put on a blue denim shirt without a collar, and it rode when he lifted Caitlin into the air. Thea forced herself not to look at his bare belly or the path of curling hair that disappeared into the waistband of his still unbuttoned jeans.

"Da's got you now, darlin'," Dillon said, laughing. He lowered her gently to kiss both her cheeks. "What shall we do until Mum's ready to feed us?"

"Us?" Thea inquired. "This is a B&B, Mr. Cameron."

"Oh, aye," Dillon said, grinning at Caitlin. "And we've just woke up. We're wanting our breakfast, Thea. We'd like stovie tatties, if you're of the mind to make them."

"I'm not of the mind," Thea assured him. She didn't run a restaurant, and she wasn't his personal chef.

"Thea, I'm starving. There's a gale outside, and—"

"You didn't mind the gale last night," she answered, mentally kicking herself for doing it. The last thing she wanted was having him know that his leaving had worried her. "The gale is nearly over. A little walk into St. Margaret's Hope will do you good."

"Thea, I had things to do last night."

"I'm sure you did," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"I had to get my clothes, Thea." She glanced up at him, and he gave her a charming grin. "You wouldn't let a man starve would you? It's been a long time since I've eaten."

Thea tried not to grin. "Well. . ." She wavered. "I suppose I could make this one exception."

"Bless you, Thea."

"I'm not going to feed you anything if you don't get out of my way! Caitlin, my sweet," Thea said to her bouncing daughter, "take this man for a walk."

"Ah, a walk, is it!" Dillon growled, making Caitlin chuckle out loud. "Lead the way, darlin'."

He stayed out of the kitchen long enough for Thea to get the meat, potato, and onion dish called stove tatties on the table.

"You're not sitting down with me?" he asked when he saw only one place set.

"No. I don't eat with the guests. And it's a bit late in the day for breakfast for those of us who aren't out carousing all night."

Dillon stared at her, and again Thea could have kicked herself. "Could I keep Katy with me? I'd like to have her in the highchair by me if you don't mind."

Thea turned one hand palm up, giving him tacit permission.

"And don't call her Katy," she said on her way out.

"Caitlin to you, Katy to me," he said mildly.

Thea sighed, changing directions in the hallway because of a sharp knock on the back door. It was still raining, and Roddy and Flora Macnab waited to be let in.

Roddy was a burly man in his late sixties. His face and hands were weathered from having made his living on the sea in his pre-grocer, pre-postman days, and his white hair stuck out in random tufts around his ears. Flora, tall and thin, was English, not Scots, as she was quick to tell any incomer ignorant enough not to know the difference. Her manner was gruff but loving, and she'd seen Thea through Griffen's death and through childbirth, never once mentioning Dillon Cameron.

"Counting noses, I see," Thea said, knowing the island custom of making sure all its residents weathered the storm. "Come in out of the rain."

Both of them were wearing their foul-weather gear, and Thea held Roddy's walking stick while he helped Flora out of her yellow mackintosh.

"You and the bairn are all right then," Roddy said.

"Yes, fine. Would you like tea?"

"Of course we would," Flora said.

"Roddy and I, old as we are, need a spot of tea if we're to carry on."

"Is there any damage around the island?" Thea asked.

"None to speak, lass," Roddy said.

"And we've nearly everyone accounted for."

"You haven't seen Dillon, have you?" Flora asked. "He lifted a pint with Roddy sometime after midnight, but we've lost him since."

"He's here," Thea answered.

"Oh?" Flora said, the corners of her mouth turning down. "Now, there's a

place we never considered," she added to Roddy, who tried not to grin. "Where is he?"

"Having breakfast."

"Well, it's all right with me if it's all right with you, my girl," Flora said. "He's in the kitchen, is he?" She headed in that direction. "Here you are, you slippery devil! No, now don't get up on my behalf. Have your . . . breakfast, is it?"

"Can I give you some stovie tatties, Flora?" Dillon asked.

"Me? Good heavens, no, lad. I have to watch my girlish figure. Now, Roddy here'll sit down with you."

"Come on, Caitlin," Thea said, getting her out of the highchair. Flora followed them into the nursery.

"Flora, I don't know why Dillon is doing this."

"He wants to marry you. You don't find a man like Dillon Cameron saying he does if he doesn't."

"Well, he took his own good time getting here!"

Flora frowned. "Took his own good time? Thea, you didn't *tell* him about Caitlin."

"Then what is he doing here now?"

"Oh, well, that's simple enough. Roddy and I spilled the beans—and don't interrupt me till I get everything said. It was after Caitlin had the bronchitis last month. You were all worn out with taking care of her night and day with no help, and, well, Dillon is Roddy's . . . godson, I guess you'd call it. You know how they do hereabouts, working on the sea the way they do. Roddy didn't have a son of his own, so Ian Cameron gave Dillon to Roddy if ever he couldn't take care of him. You know what an old duffer my Roddy is. He expects that every man will do his luty and all that, and Dillon certainly wasn't. So we went down to Aberdeen to give him what for. Caught him at he—what is that place?—the heliport.

Roddy was about to bash him, and then he sees that our Dillon doesn't know the first thing about Caitlin here. Thea, you should have seen the lad. It nearly broke my old heart, I can tell you. He just stood there, and then he had to walk off by himself for a bit. And the rest of the crew were yelling for him to get on the helicopter, but he was just standing. Finally I gave him that picture I had in my purse—the one of you and Caitlin sitting by the fire. He took it and he went—nearly thirty days with the shift and going through the decompressing—with all that on his mind. I'd say he got here pretty damn quick, for my money."

Thea bent down to keep Caitlin out of the diaper pail, her mind in a whirl.

"Flora, I think I would like to go for a walk," she murmured.

"Go on, then. I'll hold the fort."

Thea went quickly down the hallway and past the kitchen door, hearing Dillon and Roddy quietly talking in Gaelic when she passed. She grabbed up Griffen's jacket, pulling it on as she went out the door and breaking into a run as soon as she was out of the yard.

The clouds were moving rapidly inland, and the last of the afternoon sun was shining through. Thea felt like a child let out of school, and she didn't stop running until she reached the rise of land that overlooked St. Margaret's Hope. She stood with her feet planted firmly on the rugged turf and breathed deeply, feeling this ancient place renew her strength.

"It's not like South Carolina, is it?" Dillon said behind her, and she whirled around to face him. "Now, let me say two things before you get angry, Thea. First, the stovie tatties were grand, and second, I'm here over Flora's dead body."

A gull screamed overhead, and Thea turned away from him toward the sea. "I'm not going to say anything."

"I wanted to ask you a question,"

Dillon said, coming closer, their shoulders nearly touching.

"The trouble is, you ask me the same two questions: Will I marry you and why haven't I gone home."

"Why haven't you gone home?" he asked, and she gave a small laugh.

"I want to know," he said again, and she sighed.

"Dillon." She realized suddenly that she couldn't tell him anything but the truth when she looked into his beautiful eyes. "I'm afraid," she said simply. "I love this island. It's my home now. But if I go to South Carolina, I'm afraid I'll never come back here again, and everything here—my memories here—will become like a dream. I'll take Caitlin there when she's older, but not now while I'm—" So alone, she almost said.

"Sometimes... you look at me with such reproach," he said.

"If I do, it's myself I'm reproaching, not you."

"Because we went to bed together? When that happened, Thea, you were near mad with grief. I... knew how much you needed me to be Griffen. And I needed—"

Thea caught his arm when he would have walked away from her. "What?" she asked, her fingers digging into his sleeve.

"I couldn't save him for you, Thea. I needed your forgiveness. I know how you loved him, Thea," he said quietly. Then his arms went around her, and she leaned into him, desperately needing to be close to him.

He suddenly held her away from him. "You still wear his jacket," he said, his face grave. He released her and headed down the path toward St. Margaret's Hope.

"I want you, Thea," he called back to her. "But I won't be Griffen for you ever again. I'm done with feeling guilty. When

you lie with me, it'll be because you want Dillon Cameron."

---

When, not if.

Dillon Cameron's arrogance was an open declaration of war as far as Thea was concerned. The battles were all verbal, all of them precipitated by Dillon's questions:

"Thea, why don't you marry me?"

"Dillon, how many women have you lived with in the last year?"

"Two! Sometimes I stay with my mother and my sister Bronwyn in Aberdeen."

"And what about the blonde woman who followed you here?"

"Thea, *that* was my sister Bronwyn!"

"Sure it was, Dillon."

And yet he continued to court her, not with expensive gifts, but with a great willingness to spend time with their daughter and to take care of household repairs. He annoyed Thea endlessly when Caitlin was asleep with his relentless quest for something to fix. In desperation she remembered that the kitchen sink was sometimes known to leak. Dillon had only three days left before his next shift, and one would have thought she had given him a million dollars.

He was lying in the middle of the kitchen floor with Caitlin trying to sit on him, his head under the sink.

"Thea, will you go to the *ceilidh* with me this evening," he said unexpectedly.

"I'm already going."

"With someone else you mean?" The question sounded neutral enough.

"Not exactly. I have kitchen duty. I'm on the food committee."

"You're taking Katy?"

"Of course," she said.

"I'll look after her when you get there."

Thea laughed. A *ceilidh* was a community gathering with dancing and plenty

of "wee drops" to keep everyone merry. She couldn't imagine Dillon Cameron going to one and babysitting.

He emerged from under the sink. "And what's so funny about that, if you don't mind saying?"

"I don't mind saying. I was just thinking that she'd cramp your style. You're the reason every woman on the island goes to these things, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't know about that," he said, annoyed. "I would still like to see you there," he added carefully.

"Fine. I'll be there," she said indifferently.

"God, you make me angry!" He slid back under the sink. You know we'd have a good time together, and you do want to go. I don't know why you want to keep the both of us miserable!"

He finally went to the *ceilidh* without her, slamming the back door hard as he went out.

*What is the matter with me?* Thea kept thinking. She had wanted to go with him. She'd wanted more than that, if she were honest with herself.

---

Thea spent too much time getting ready for the *ceilidh*. She didn't have many choices in her wardrobe, but she kept trying out combinations of what she had.

"I'm not going to do this," she said finally. She was simply going to be what she was, a reasonably attractive thirty-two-year-old American woman. She picked up a black, mid-calf-length wool skirt and a knit wool sweater in the Fair Isle pattern. She tied back her unruly hair with a copper-colored satin ribbon.

"This is the best I've got to offer, Cameron," she said aloud. "I don't look too bad, and I smell good."

Flora met her at the front door of the community hall—an ominous sign. "The two of you had words, did you?" Flora asked immediately.

"Flora—"

"What I'm wondering, Thea, is are you thinking with all your cylinders? Dillon Cameron is a proud man. He won't be letting you spit in his eye forever. Now, do you want him or don't you?"

"I... don't know."

"Liar," Flora said good-naturedly. "Well, let me take this beautiful child for you so you can do your stint in the kitchen. We'll stroll around and tell her Da who's here—in case he's wondering or anything."

Thea was about to protest, but she leaned down to give Caitlin a kiss instead. She didn't want to protest, dammitall. She wanted Dillon to know she was here.

She had arrived late, and the place was filled with locals and the oil men from Flotta terminal. A sudden whoop came from the dance floor as the band broke into a song Thea recognized as "Thunderhead." It was filled with unresolved minor chords and made her think of pagan dances in the moonlight. She could feel the floor jarring rhythmically as she started her kitchen duty, making sure the food dishes stayed filled.

Peeking out, she spotted Dillon at the opposite end of the hall and watched him fondly. He was so arresting, standing head and shoulders above nearly everyone there. He shook hands with the old men and teased the old women.

A young woman with red—stoplight red—hair and a short pink dress caught Dillon by his arm, pulling him with her toward the outside door. He went without hesitation, and Thea hastily went back to filling food plates.

Dillon loved the women, and they loved him right back. Why couldn't she get that through her head?

"Thea?" Dillon said close behind her.

He had come in the back door. His hair was mussed, and he had lipstick on his chin.

Thea gave him a crooked smile. "Ah, yes," she said wryly, wiping the lipstick off with her finger. "Yet another sister."

"That's the *same* sister," he said. "She's come all the way from Aberdeen to talk me out of my car."

"Right," Thea said agreeably.

"Thea, that's Bronwyn. She wants my car while I'm on the oil rig. She's always changing herself around. I half expect her to turn up with her head shaved."

"Dillon, if she's your sister, why don't I ever get to meet her? She's Caitlin's aunt, and she's been here twice."

Dillon sighed. "Because," he said patiently, "she's incredibly rude. She only wants my car to dash about in, and once she talks me out of it, she's done with me. The lass has got a terrible wild streak."

"And you don't?"

Dillon gave her a "Who me?" look. "Indeed, no, Thea," he said. "I'm not wild at all."

Thea looked into his eyes, trying not to grin and feeling her knees weaken at the tender look she saw there.

Dillon caught her arm, pulling her against him. "I've never danced with you," he said gravely, and he was taking her out onto the dance floor, his grip like iron in case she had any notions of escape.

The song was called "The Sapling," a quiet tender ballad. She was too addled to comprehend lyrics. There was nothing but the sensation of being pressed against Dillon's hard male body.

Forty-eight hours, she thought, holding on to the back of his shirt. Forty-eight hours and he'd be gone for nearly a month... or forever.



Later they walked home together in the dark, Dillon carrying the sleeping Caitlin.

"Another storm coming," Dillon offered, and Thea said nothing, pushing the rattling stroller along the road, unsure of him suddenly.

She still longed for him, but she supposed he didn't want her to lead him past the point of no return. If she did, he might really feel obligated to marry her. And if that *wasn't* the way he felt, surely he could manage to say more to her than that succinct weather forecast.

Once they reached the house and Thea put the baby to bed, she walked back through the dark rooms, wondering why Dillon hadn't bothered to turn on a light. She could just make out his silhouette at the end window in the kitchen.

"Don't turn on the light," he said without turning around. "Thea, have I kept my word to you? About staying here with you and Katy? You've no cause for complaint that I've not been keeping your rules?"

"I've... no complaints," she said.

"Aye. I've kept it, and you've not known the times I've meant to break it. The first night I was here, Thea, I had to go out into a gale because I didn't think I could be here and not... touch you. I've watched you sleeping—did you know that? I had to be close to you, Thea, and you'd not have me anywhere near in the light of day, except as Katy's dad. I think about you all the time—about making love with you. I... can't keep my word anymore, Thea." He gave a sharp sigh. "Thea, tell me. Do you want me to stay or go? I'll not stay another night here without you in my arms, lass."

"Stay," she said simply, hardly recognizing the sound of her own voice. He covered the distance between them, reaching for her in the dark. She went willingly, joyfully.

He lifted her up off the floor, carrying her into the downstairs bedroom. She covered his face in quick, wanting kisses as they undressed. Then he bent slowly to place her in the middle of the bed, following her down to lie beside her.

"Thea," he said, his voice gruff with



passion as he pulled her back into his arms. "Don't close your eyes. Look at me."

She opened her eyes as he asked. "Look at me," he said again, his mouth hovering just above hers. "I want you to see who I am—your *leman*—your lover."

Thea stared into his eyes, her breath coming in quick gasps as his mouth found hers.

"Look at me," he commanded again. "Is it me you want? Tell me, Thea," he urged with his words and with his body.

"I want *you*!" she said, her voice shaky with passion.

Her fingernails scratched him, digging into his back, and she was lost in this exquisite quest she was driven to complete. He belonged to her, and she told him so, hissing her ownership against his ear. "You—are—*mine*!" she cried at the moment of her release.

---

Sheltered and warm in Dillon's arms, she immediately fell asleep, dreaming at some point of a sunny day on the beach at St. Margaret's Hope.

And...Griffen...standing with his hands resting on his hips, smiling and happy. Thea's eyes traveled over him in disbelief. He was wearing a striped rugby shirt and a pair of white shorts, ready for a game of football with Dillon and the men in the village. He smiled broadly, his blue eyes merry, and Thea reached to touch the beloved, red-bearded face. But he shook his head slowly, blowing her a kiss and turning away. The sun disappeared, and he began to run up the beach.

"Griffen!" she called to him. She needed to talk to him, needed to tell him that she wasn't alone anymore. Dillon was here now. "Griffen!" she called. Then, she felt his arms around her, his warm kiss on her neck.

*Here you are*, she thought, laughing at her worry.

"Oh, Griffen."

Thea came awake instantly, knowing what she'd done. Dillon stiffened against her; then he let her go and sat up on the side of the bed.

"Dillon," she said, reaching out to touch his bare shoulder. "I didn't—"

He shrugged her hand away. "It's all right, Thea," he said, his voice deadly quiet.

"Dillon, I was dreaming!"

"That's worse, isn't it?" he said. "Awake, it's deliberate. Asleep, it's what you really want and feel."

He found his shorts and put them on. "I'll check on Caitlin," he said on his way out of the room.

"Dillon!" she said.

"Leave it alone now, Thea."

She could hear him going into the nursery, then into the kitchen. The radio came on, and she could hear him switching stations until he found the weather forecast.

By the time she had her clothes on, Caitlin was awake and Dillon had gone upstairs.

He had his duffel bag when he came back down. He set his bag down in the hallway at the foot of the stairs and came into the kitchen.

"I...have to leave, Thea. If I don't go ahead of the storm, I won't get back in time."

Thea nodded, her lips pressed firmly together so she wouldn't cry.

"Well," he said, bending to kiss Caitlin gently on the cheek. "Good-bye, lass." His eyes met Thea's as he straightened up. She lifted her mouth to his. His kiss was gentle and filled with farewell, and his arms slid around her and Caitlin both.

"Dillon," Thea said, clutching the back of his sweater with her free hand. He let go of her, put on his jacket, and gave Caitlin one last caress before he picked up

his duffel bag. "We have to talk, Dillon."

"I've told you, Thea," he said. "I'll not be Griffen for you ever again."

"Dillon," she said again as he reached the back door. "Mind how you go."

He opened the back door. "Oh, aye, lass," he said, smiling sadly. "I'll have to. It's the only thing you've ever asked me to do for you."

The wind whipped at his hair and clothes, and he walked leaning into it with his duffel bag over his shoulder. He turned and looked back once at the last possible moment he could still see them at the window.

She was totally unprepared for the desolation she felt, and Caitlin didn't help.

"Da!" she kept calling until Thea began to cry.

They had a late breakfast, and Thea tried to keep her occupied so she wouldn't keep looking.

When someone knocked at the back door, Thea went to see, sighing heavily and forgetting that she was red-eyed from crying. It was Flora Macnab.

"Flora," Thea said, opening the door to let her and the wind and rain in. "Are you trying to get blown out to sea or what?"

"Well, don't just stand there, my girl," Flora said. "I've come to—" She broke off, looking hard at Thea's red eyes.

"You've come to find out what's going on with Dillon and me," Thea said. "And we both know it."

"Since you're the one who brought it up," Flora said, taking a seat, "what have you done this time?"

"I called him by the wrong name!" Thea said in exasperation.

Flora leaned back and frowned. "Well, that's not too bad unless—I don't suppose you picked the worst possible time to do it?"

Thea didn't answer.

"Oh, my sainted aunt, Thea!" Flora said.

"I said it was stupid!"

"Yes, and how are you going to make amends for it is what I'm wondering."

"I'm not going to. I think it's probably for the best that it happened. It's better that he's out of my life now before it gets any worse. He'd never be happy here."

"Now, how the devil do you know that? Why don't you just let Roddy have a go at finding out when his shift ends? Then you could meet him at the heliport in Aberdeen when he comes in off the oil rig. I'd keep Caitlin for you."

"Flora, will you stay out of this?"

"Still running scared, are you?"

"I'm serious, Flora."

"I know you are," Flora said, raising. "Well, I'm off. Dillon is a good lad, Thea. He's worth the trouble."

Thea walked her to the door and stood watching until Flora disappeared down the beach path. Dillon's sad face suddenly came to mind. God, she wanted to go to Aberdeen. She wanted to be with him, to put her arms around him. Nothing she could say would make him think that she hadn't used him, hadn't been pretending that he was Griffen, but if she could just... hold him.



For the next month Thea mostly stayed indoors away from the "October dreaching" the islands took this time of year, playing with Caitlin and thinking of nothing but Dillon Cameron—not about whether she had done the right thing in giving in to her feelings about Dillon, but about whether she could have done otherwise.

At last she stopped fighting her own feelings and decided she would go to meet him in Aberdeen when his shift ended. She toyed with the idea of bringing Caitlin, then decided against it, taking Flora up on her offer to "nanny" because

the time had come to see Dillon with no distractions and no purpose other than to decide where the two of them would go from here.

She arrived in Aberdeen in a wind-whipped downpour. She waited anxiously in the heliport terminal, watching out the rain-splattered windows as the crews came and went, regardless of the weather.

She finally saw him, walking in the middle of a group of oil riggers who had just arrived. Dillon's too-long hair whipped about in the wind as he scanned the windows. Her heart lurched when she knew that he'd seen her. She nervously pulled the belt on her raincoat tighter and tried not to think of all the other more sophisticated women who must have waited for Dillon in the past.

*I shouldn't have come*, she thought in a panic when she saw Dillon's grave face.

He walked purposefully toward her, carrying his duffel bag.

"Hello," he said when he reached her. Period.

"Dillon," one of the men in the group called, "don't forget to see Oliver before you go."

Dillon didn't answer. His eyes were smiling, Thea decided, but not much else.

"Hello," she responded, her heart pounding with his nearness.

"Dillon, did you hear me?" the man insisted.

"He heard you, he heard you," another, clearly American, voice declared. "Dammitall, Clyde, can't you see the man's working?"

The group moved on in a ripple of laughter.

"I don't suppose an old rat-hat diver like you would need a little help?" the American inquired as he passed.

"Thank you, no, Barry," Dillon said without looking at him. "But I'll be remembering you asked that the next time

the pipe's hung on the stinger."

Barry laughed and went his way, and Dillon took her by the arm, then smiled. "Come along with me up to Oliver's office," he said.

Thea hadn't remembered the name, but she did recognize Oliver's face when he came out of his office. He was one of the company officials who had come to St. Margaret's Hope when Griffen died.

"Mrs. Kearney," he said, recognizing her immediately. "What a lovely adornment you are to this dreary place. I'll keep Dillon only a moment."

Oliver was a man of his word, and Dillon soon summoned a taxi for the trip to his Aberdeen "flat," because his sister Bronwyn still had his car.

Dillon's apartment was in a long granite building that followed the curves of a winding, shady street, and they ran hand in hand through the rain and into the entry.

The apartment was small and immaculate, with no clutter anywhere. Apparently the discipline Dillon had to have to live in a cramped pressure chamber carried over into his private life.

"Let me hold you," he whispered as soon as the door shut behind them, and she went immediately into his arms, loving the soft moan he gave as she pressed her body into his. "I've missed you, Thea," he said, his voice soft against her ear.

Thea's hands were already moving over his broad back. She pressed her face into his shoulder, weak with wanting him.

"I'm going to take you to bed," Dillon whispered. He abruptly picked her up, carrying her into his bedroom and placing her on the bed. Dillon worked at the buttons on her dress with trembling fingers. She was wearing a pale pink teddy that revealed far more than it concealed, and she'd bought it just for him.

"Beautiful," he said appreciatively, his

hands flowing over her body in long strokes. "You're wearing it for me then?" he whispered. "And you're glad to see me. You are, aren't you?" he insisted.

"Dillon," Thea whispered. "Yes, for you." She loved the pleased look that came into his eyes. "I love you, Dillon."

She was still looking into his eyes, and she hadn't known she was going to say it.

"Thea," he said, hugging her fiercely to him. "You mean it? You wouldn't tell me a lie?"

He leaned back to look at her, and there was such worry on his face that she reached out for him again. "I love you, Dillon," she whispered, soaring higher than she had ever been.

"I thought we were going to sleep." Thea murmured, lying in his arms.

"Aye, we were," Dillon answered. He stroked her hair and planted a kiss on her forehead. "But I'm dying of hunger." He abruptly sat up, pulling her with him. "Come on, we'll go somewhere and celebrate."

"I want a big hamburger and french fries—and lots of onion. Mustard. And dill pickles."

"Well, I'll have to find it for you, won't I?" Dillon said with a resigned sigh. "I don't want you going home to America to get it."

It was still raining, and he took her to a small place near the heliport called Little Houston that catered to the oil boom's influx of Americans: Dillon found them a booth by the window, and Thea watched the rainy street while he went to get the food.

"Hey, you're Mrs. Kearney, aren't you?" someone said, and Thea looked up at one of the oil rig crew she'd seen in the heliport. Barry, she remembered.

"Yes," Thea said, and he nodded.

"Mrs. Kearney..." he said slowly, and she realized that he was less than sober. "I knew Griffen," he offered.

"Good man, Griffen. Dillon's a good man, too, though. He ain't scared... I mean he ain't scared of *nothing*! He tell you Oliver wants him testing the helium system? He—" Barry stopped and looked out the window.

"Helium's good for diving," he said abruptly, looking back at her. "Might be dangerous, though." He grinned, drinking the beer he held so lovingly. "I was just wondering, Mrs. Kearney..." He belched. "I was just wondering what you're going to do if Dillon—" He stopped as Dillon walked up.

"Barry," Dillon said, his voice a bit guarded. "Is there something you're wanting?"

Barry grinned wider. "Aw, no," he assured Dillon, but then he glanced at Thea. "Well, hell, yeah, there is." He looked at Thea again. "She's a pretty woman, ain't she, Dillon? So how about it? The same deal you had with Griffen. You know I'd take care of her..." He looked wistfully at Thea. "I'd take... real... good care of her."

Dillon grabbed him by his shirt front. "Get away from here, Barry," he said, his voice quiet and deadly. "Now."

Barry looked from one of them to the other, more puzzled than warned. "What? See, Dillon, I'm going to promise you just like you promised old Griffen. If anything happens to you, Barry will step right in, see? Whatever she needs doing, I'll do it. See, I wasn't *asleep*, Dillon. I *heard* you and Griffen talking."

Thea abruptly stood up, her mind filled with another drunken man.

*You're mine, Thea. Griffen gave you to me.*

*Oh, Griffen. I finally understand.*

"Thea," Dillon said urgently as she picked up her purse. "You don't understand this, Thea!"

"Yes, I do. I understand better than anybody on this earth. You're a good

friend, Dillon. To Griffen, if not to me."

She turned and walked away, stepping into the rain with Dillon right behind her.

"Thea, where are you going?" he yelled.

"Home," she answered.

"You have to let me tell you, Thea!"

"Dillon, please!" she cried, trying to get his fingers off her arm. "The only thing I was sure of in my life was that Griffen Kearney loved me. I don't want you to tell me! I don't want to lose that, too!"

---

She took a taxi to the train station, and bought a ticket on the night train.

At best she'd be traveling for the next twelve hours, and if she needed to cry, she'd have plenty of time to do it. She made a call to the phone booth in front of Roddy's giving a message about her expected return, and she boarded the train, sitting by the window in an empty compartment and waiting for the tears to come.

She sat dry-eyed for the entire journey, arriving in St. Margaret's Hope just ahead of another gale.

"Dillon's here," Flora said as Thea got off the post bus. "Had one of the oil company helicopters drop him off. Damn thing landed right on the beach."

But Thea fled the details, shutting herself away with Caitlin for the duration of the bad weather, blessing the fact that the storm would extend her solitude even if it hadn't kept Dillon from following.

She couldn't sleep at night. She kept drifting on the edge of it, hearing the rain and the keening of the wind and thinking that someone was calling her or that Caitlin was crying.

She came awake with a start at a burst of rain against the bedroom windows. Nearly dawn, she thought, listening a moment for Caitlin.

"Thea?"

She jumped violently. "Dillon, what

are you doing here?"

He was standing by the bed, then suddenly he was in it, pulling her into his arms.

"Don't send me away, Thea."

"Dillon," she protested one last time, returning his embrace finally. He felt so good to her, and her arms tightened around him.

Thea held him quietly for a time, listening to the storm outside and to his breathing.

"You never would have told me about your promise to Griffen, would you?" she asked.

"No," he answered.

"No?" she said incredulously, the temptation to forgive him going right out the window.

"It was between Griffen and me, Thea. It had nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do—! Griffen was my husband!"

"Aye! He was. *Was*, Thea. And he was my friend for the whole of his life. It isn't easy now, Thea. I'm... jealous of him, don't you see? I'm jealous of him in a way I never was when he was alive. I'm afraid I'm not the man he was, and I want to be. For you and/Katy."

"You thought I'd never know, is that it?"

"Yes." His arms tightened around her. "I didn't think anyone knew. I didn't see how you could find out. It's all... daft, Thea. Griffen was—"

"What?" she asked when he didn't go on.

"Do you remember telling me that he was afraid?"

She remembered, and she remembered how angry she was at Dillon at the time, because he was alive and fearless—The Great Silkie.

"Sometimes a diver knows when he shouldn't dive, Thea. He can feel it. Griffen said to go out then was like climbing

into your own coffin. I...didn't understand. I've never felt that. I knew the tiredness and the closed in feeling, but I never knew that—that sense of doom or whatever it is. Griffen did. It got to the point that he couldn't dive. The crew chiefs won't hold it against a man a time or two, but if it keeps up, you're out of a job. They think you can't dive anymore, and most can't. Sinclair...can't.

"Griffen couldn't go out, but he said he'd be over it if I'd do something for him. I thought he wanted me to mother him along when he was out, until the feeling left. But that wasn't it, Thea. He was worried about you—and he asked me.

"Take Thea for me," he said. 'Give me your word, man.' I thought he was joking—he laughed a bit—in that way he had. But he wasn't joking, Thea. 'I have to know she'll be with a man who'll cherish her, a man who cares about her. You care about her, Cam,' he said. I didn't know

what to say to him. I didn't know he *knew*, you see. That I...cared about you."

He sat up on the side of the bed, and Thea moved with him, tentatively reaching to put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now what are you doing?" she asked sadly. "You've made me listen—are you leaving?"

"No, no," he said, reaching up to put his hand over hers. "I want to come home to you. I want to *always* come home to you."

"You can't stand being domesticated!"

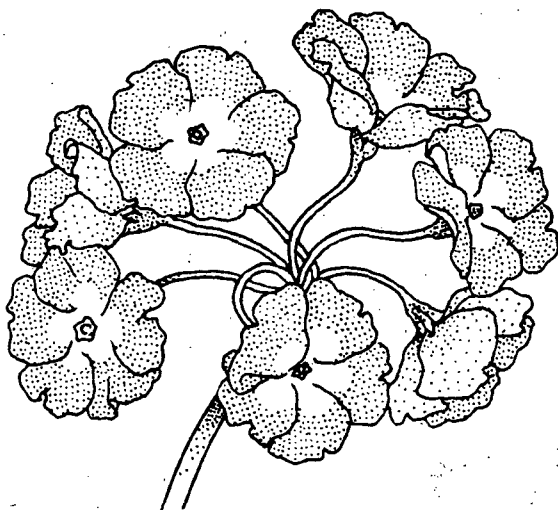
"Thea, I love you, and you love me. Don't you?"

She pressed her face into his shoulder.

"Don't you!" he insisted.

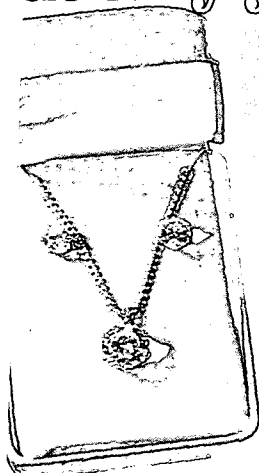
"Yes!"

"I love you, Thea," Dillon said, and she smiled. Dillon Cameron had come home. ♥

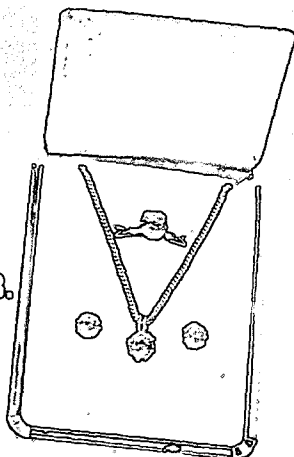


# IS IT REAL?... MAYBE!

but only you would know!

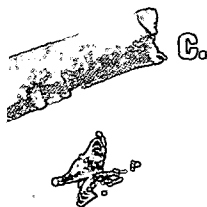


A.

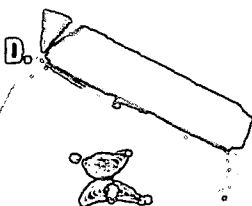


B.

## UNBEATABLE VALUE!



C.



D.

A spectacular 7 ct. zirconia pendant on 18" chain with matching 3 ct. stud earrings. A real party girl Set \$40—Now **\$29.95**

B. An elegant 1.5 ct. ring with matching 1.5 ct. pendant on 18" chain and 2 ct. stud earrings. Perfect for evening wear or even smart with sport clothes. \$40.00—Now only **\$19.95** State Ring Size

C. Designers adjustable ring with two stones, 1/2 ct. cubic zirconia and synthetic ruby. An accessory that enhances any wardrobe. \$40.00—Now only **\$19.95**

D. Designers adjustable ring with two stones, 1/2 ct. cubic zirconia and electro-radiated emerald-green color stone. An accessory that enhances any wardrobe. \$40.00—Now only **\$19.95**

\$2.00 (for shipping handling)

Indicate choice and quantity  
Send check or money order payable to:  
**BROOKVILLE MARKETING, INC.**  
BOX 501

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



# AS CLOSE AS YOUR PHONE.

There are many ways to lose weight. But the easiest is to pick up a phone, dial our toll-free number, and order Eliotrim™ Caffeine-free Diet Aids, the most effective appetite suppressant available without a prescription.

You can order exactly the type and strength you want, because you select from the wide variety shown here. That's something stores can't offer.

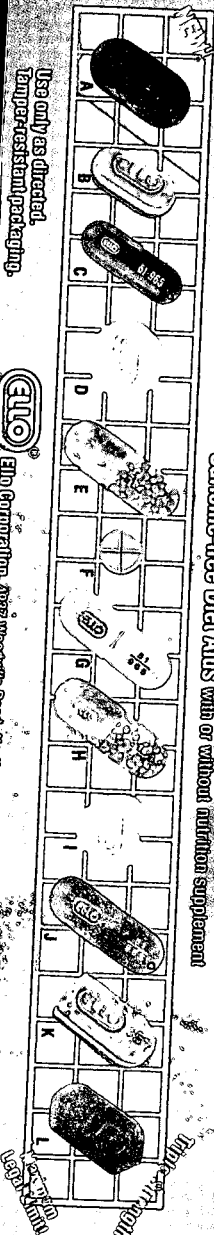
Call now. You have nothing to lose... except inches from your waistline!

12 popular types and strengths to help you lose weight fast!

...form a mild appetite suppressant to our triple strength diet aid containing a combination of ascorbic acid (a nutrition supplement) and the maximum legal limit of phenylpropanolamine, a drug available previously by prescription only!



Caffeine-free Diet Aids with or without nutrition supplement



Use only as directed.  
Temper-resistant packaging.



Eliotrim Corporation, 4937 Woodville Road, Northwood, Ohio 43062

©1983 Eliotrim Corporation

**\$2.00 Samples!**

Get one of each Eliotrim™ Diet Aid in a special sample pack, one pack per customer. Pre-paid only. Try it!

Call TOLL-FREE 24 hours a day.  
**1-800-523-0732**  
In Ohio, 1-419-699-4509  
**Fast Delivery!** Orders shipped within 24 hours. Satisfaction guaranteed or return within 10 days for a complete refund.  
**Order Now!** 90 day supply only \$19.95 plus handling. Orders shipped C.O.D. by UPS. Or charge it! Visa and MasterCard accepted.

LICENSED TO CNZ  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED